

THE NPCs IN THIS VILLAGE SIM GAME MUST BE REAL! ♪

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NAMAKO



01

NOVEL

The game is *The Village of Fate*.

All I want is change...
But can game characters fix
a life that's all too real?

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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NPC

They're just
non-player
characters,
aren't they?

PLEASE STAMP OR SIGN HERE

Yoshio

SEAL

The game is *The Village of Fate*.

All I want is change...
But can game characters fix a life
that's all too real?

〒0×8-2641

Hokkaido Δ□ City ΔΔ Town Nishisanjou
Tel: 090×2×5×6××
The Village of Fate

Congratulations!

Dear Yoshio-sama,

Congratulations! We're pleased to inform you that you've been selected to alpha-test our new game.

You play the role of a deity who governs the fate of the villagers who worship you. Once a day, you prophesize, giving them instruction to help develop their village. Our groundbreaking A.I. gives our characters the capacity to speak and act just like real humans!

That's all we'll tell you for now. The rest, you'll learn as you play!

Please promise to keep the contents of the game confidential, and please don't say anything about it online. If you do, the game will have to be returned to us.

Two more things. First, this game requires an Internet connection. Second, if your villagers are wiped out, the game ends permanently. The game uses autosave, so you won't be able to reload from a previous save file.

Have fun!

Contents:
1 alpha copy of "The Village of Fate."



FATE

They're just
non-player
characters,
aren't they?

The game is The Village of Fate.

All I want is change...
But can game characters fix
a life that's all too real?



A person with dark hair, seen from behind, is looking at a large, wrapped log. The log is wrapped in brown paper and has a shipping label attached to it. The label has Japanese text and a barcode. The log is resting on a tiled floor. The person is wearing a grey shirt. The background is a tiled floor with a grid pattern.

"Yoshio, come here at once!"

Mom did not sound pleased. I raced downstairs to find her beckoning to me from the front door.

"Another package from this 'Village of Fate!' The fruit was nice, but what are we supposed to do with this?!"

She was pointing to a log...

...A LOG
I recognized.

**THE NPCs IN THIS
VILLAGE SIM GAME
MUST BE REAL! ♪**

NOVEL

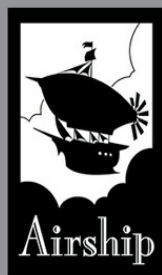
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WRITTEN BY

Hirukuma

ILLUSTRATED BY

Namako



Seven Seas Entertainment



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▶NPC Short for non-player character.
[NOUN] A character which the player cannot control.

MURAZUKURI GAME NO NPC GA NAMAMI
NO NINGEN TOSHIKA OMOENAI Vol. 1
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Prologue

“COME ON, CAROL, Chem. You too, Gams! Don’t just sit there!”

The man sat alone in a gloomy room. The only light was from the gleaming computer screen in front of him. His hair was disheveled and unbrushed. His sweatshirt and pants had seen more than a few days of wear at this point. He looked clean, however, as if he showered regularly. He was muttering to himself, but he didn’t seem angry; in spite of his exasperated tone, he was smiling.

The contents of his room were simple: a desk and the computer atop it, a bookcase filled with manga and light novels. On the floor was his futon, which he never bothered to fold away, and some weights which lay in the corner.

Usually, the man would sleep all day and play games at night. Lately, though, he’d started getting up early in the morning. The reason? A new game: *The Village of Fate*.

On his computer screen, people chopped down the vast forest around them, building a village. They seemed very human.

The game’s A.I. was impressive, especially when it came to conversations. Aside from standard greetings, the man rarely saw the same lines twice.

“Hey, everyone! It’s time for the daily prophecy!”

A beautiful woman clad in holy robes appeared on the screen. She opened a shining book as the villagers gathered around her.

The man smiled warmly. He whispered, “Do your best for me, okay, guys?” though he knew the villagers couldn’t hear him.

part 1

THE VILLAGE SIM ↵

Chapter 1:

An Amazing Game; an Undeserving Man

“**Y**OU NEED TO GET A JOB. Your father can’t work forever, you know! Things are fine right now, but what about the future? What will you do once we’re gone?”

“Come on, Mom, you’ve told me this a million times! I know!”

Why couldn’t she just let me eat my lunch in peace? I should have slept in, as usual.

Still, she was right. I was the worst. I somehow graduated high school and college without ever putting in much effort, but I just couldn’t seem to find a job, no matter how many great companies I applied to. A year passed...then another...and a decade later, I was still unemployed.

“You’re thirty years old! *Thirty!* Our neighbor Masashi-kun is thirty, and he has a decent full-time job *and* an adorable kid!”

This wasn’t the first time she’d brought up Masashi-kun. It was always either him or my classmates, all working hard, and some with their own families already. Compared to them, I’d achieved nothing.

“I’m not hungry anymore.”

I got up from my chair, wanting out of this conversation. But just as I was about to return to my room, my one safe haven in the whole world, the doorbell rang. I checked the intercom. It looked like a package.

“Delivery!” called the man.

I was about to let someone else get it when I noticed the familiar logo on the side of the box: it was from a shopping website.

“I’ll be right there!” I called.

“Don’t tell me you’ve bought something with all that money you don’t have,” snarked my mom.

“No. I must’ve won another contest.”

I liked to enter online contests. I’d won a few times. Sometimes the prizes were items of an adult nature, so I decided it was safer to go down myself. It might be something I wouldn’t want my parents to see.

I opened the door. The deliveryman stared at me for a second. I knew exactly why. Here was a guy who should be out working...but instead, he was at home, looking like a slob. I was used to it. Honestly, most of my neighbors were less subtle about staring than this guy.

“Please sign or stamp.”

“I’ll sign.” I took the small, lightweight box from him.

“It’s not food, is it?” Mom asked, peering at my package, but when she saw how small it was she lost interest and shuffled back into the kitchen. I took the package upstairs to my room and locked the door behind me.

I opened it up to find...

“Huh, a game.”

Inside the box was a CD-ROM and a single sheet of paper. All the disk had on it was the name of the game, and the paper had no images or screenshots, or even the name of the publisher. I’d entered a few competitions with games as prizes and also applied to test some games—maybe that’s what this was? I didn’t remember anything about this game in particular, though.

“The Village of Fate,” I read. “What is this, a beta copy or somethin’?”

I couldn’t remember entering to win this game, so I decided to read the letter.

“Dear Yoshio-sama,

“Congratulations! We’re pleased to inform you that you’ve been selected to alpha-test our new game.

“You play the role of a deity who governs the fate of the villagers who worship you. Once a day, you prophesize, giving them instruction to help develop their village. Our groundbreaking A.I. gives our characters the capacity to speak and

act just like real humans!”

Groundbreaking... That was a bold claim, even for advertising copy. We’d just have to see about that.

“That’s all we’ll tell you for now. The rest, you’ll learn as you play!”

The game looked like some kind of village sim. I was already familiar with city sim games, but villages were a first for me.

“Please promise to keep the contents of the game confidential, and please don’t say anything about it online. If you do, the game will have to be returned to us.”

Promise? Wouldn’t they usually call it a condition and have me sign an NDA or something? Besides, even if I did leak anything online, it’s not like they’d know who did it. I couldn’t be the only alpha tester, after all.

“Two more things. First, this game requires an Internet connection. Second, if your villagers are wiped out, the game ends permanently. The game uses autosave, so you won’t be able to reload from a previous save file.”

Now that was just mean. Plus, it made no sense. I was supposed to be alpha-testing for them, right? What if the difficulty levels needed to be tweaked? I made a mental note to complain about it.

Honestly, it felt a bit fishy to me. I searched the title online but nothing came up. I didn’t have the name of the development company, so there wasn’t much else I could do. The whole thing was starting to seem really suspicious.

I don’t wanna risk getting a virus...

I’d won my main PC as a prize, but I’d never gotten rid of my older one. I decided to try the disk on that one first—if it got nuked, no big deal. I was sure at this point that the whole thing was some kind of prank, but it wasn’t like I had anything important to do. And hey, if I got tricked, at least it’d make a good story to post online.

I set up my old PC and put the disk in the drive. It didn’t even list the required specs, so the only way to find out if it’d run was to try it. The title *The Village of Fate* appeared on my screen in big letters, the word “enter” flashing

underneath.

Minimalist, or just lazy?

I pressed the enter key.

“No way...”

The graphics on my monitor were gorgeous, a far cry from the pathetic title screen. I watched as a cart rattled along through a forest, drawn by a pair of chestnut horses. I could see every last hair and drop of sweat on the horses’ hides as they galloped.

Sure, graphics have been getting better and better, but these are the most realistic graphics I’ve ever seen...

I watched in awe as the opening cutscene continued. The horses galloped ahead through the forest. The driver gripped the reins, looking back in panic now and then. He had handsome, chiseled features marred by a large scar on his face. His clothes interested me more than his face, though—at first glance, his clothes just looked like dirty, brownish rags, but on closer inspection he was wearing leather armor. He had a longsword on his back and a dagger at his waist.

“So, a sim game...just set in the middle ages. Hm.”

The camera panned up from the thundering cart, revealing what was chasing it: a pack of boar-like creatures ridden by green-skinned humanoids with blood-red eyes and sharp fangs poking out of their mouths, making it clear they weren’t human. Okay, not truly historical, then—this was a fantasy game with monsters.

Next, the camera panned up from the beasts, dipped past the horses’ noses, and entered the cart itself. Inside was a family of three: a timid, middle-aged man holding his wife and daughter close to him with trembling arms. Across from them sat a young girl in religious clothing. Her hands were clasped as she called on the “God of Fate.”

The camera switched back to an overhead view. As the monsters closed in, they struck at the cart with rusted swords and axes. With each strike, the screen shook and the people inside screamed.

I knew it was a game, but the distress on their faces and the fear in their screams were so real! Suddenly, the cart was enveloped in a golden light, and I exhaled—I'd been holding my breath.

The praying girl's book was the source of the light. Blinded, the monsters shielded their eyes and began to scream. Many fell off their boar mounts as the horses finally pulled the cart to safety.

After the tattered cart drew to a halt in a forest clearing, the armored driver let out a small sigh. He stepped down from his seat, but only after he'd taken a good look around did he allow himself to stretch.

The people clambered out of the back one by one. The family of three held on to each other, relief clear on their faces. The religious girl went to speak to the driver, but their voices weren't audible. The camera panned around the characters slowly before rising back up to the overhead view.

"Guess that's the opening cutscene done. Now what?"

I swiveled the mouse around the screen. There was no text explaining anything, so that was all I could really do. I tried clicking on the driver.

Gams, 26. A swordsman with countless battle scars on his face and body. Elder brother to the priestess Chem.

"So clicking on them brings up their bios, huh? No surprises there."

Next, I went for the praying girl.

Chem, 19. A priestess who worships the God of Fate. Gams's younger sister.

"A swordsman and priestess sibling pair? Interesting..."

Gams had black hair and eyes, while Chem had brown hair and blue eyes. They didn't look like siblings, but they were both good-looking—and you couldn't expect a game to bother with family resemblance. Gams had a rugged handsomeness to him, and his frame was muscular yet slender—if not for the scars, I'd think he was some sort of athlete. Chem, on the other hand, was quite prim and proper, which just made her priestess outfit suit her more. Its looseness concealed her figure, but it was still clear she had a bit of shape to

her chest.

In my experience, Western games always gave their female characters overly defined facial features, while the men were weirdly buff. In this game, however, the character designs seemed more geared toward a Japanese audience.

“I wonder where this game was made?”

Most sim games came from the West and were translated into Japanese, but I had a feeling this was a Japanese original. From the quality of the cutscenes, it seemed like a game with a decent budget, too. These graphics alone would definitely draw a lot of attention online.

I was curious, but I’d research it later. I still had a few character bios to read, after all. Namely, the family of three.

I started with the dad. He was slim, with dirty-blond hair, drooping eyes, and hollow cheeks—an all-around scrawny guy. Definitely not somebody I’d pick to help me out in a fight.

Rodice, 33. Husband, and father of one daughter. Runs a small general store in the village.

I moved on to his wife. Her copper-colored hair was tied back in a ponytail. Her eyes were big, and her mouth was wide. She was meatier than Rodice, too. Her, I *would* pick to help me out in a fight.

Lyra, 30. Strong-willed and domineering.

Their daughter had wavy golden hair and large eyes. In other words, she’d inherited her parents’ best features. I clicked on the girl as she scampered around.

Carol, 7. Always smiling but mature for her age.

“These must be the main characters... So I guess they’re the ones I need to direct, huh?”

The problem was, I wasn’t quite sure what to do. Sure, the graphics were great, but if I didn’t get a handle on the controls, I’d be stuck staring at the same screen forever.

Didn’t the letter say something about a prophecy? I rummaged through the

package, trying to find it again, when suddenly I heard a strange tapping sound. I looked back at the screen to find that my villagers were talking among themselves, their speech written out in text boxes. It seemed that only the cutscenes in this game were voiced.

“I’m sorry... I was supposed to defend *everyone*, but it was all I could do to save you four...” Gams was bowing apologetically to Rodice and his family.

“It’s a miracle we survived. We should be thanking you!” Rodice bowed his head deeper than Gams, and his wife and daughter followed his lead.

“What was that light just now, Gams?” Carol asked eagerly. “Tell me, Big Brother!”

“Now, now, Carol. Like I’ve told you so many times, Gams is *my* brother, not yours.” Chem stepped forward to try and dislodge Carol from Gams’s arm, which she was clinging to like glue.

Though there was no indication of her emotion in the text, the tiny graphic displayed above Chem’s head showed she was angry. I zoomed in on her face. Sure enough, while her expression was gentle, she did *not* look amused. She must’ve been a doting little sister type. Considering the popular archetype plus her beautiful character design, if she wasn’t a main character, I’d eat the game disk.

“Come on, Chem, she’s just a kid.”

“Sorry, Gams.”

“Yeah, I’m just a kid!” Carol glared at the older girl, who glared right back at her.

Gams let out a sigh. It looked like all these characters had their own little personalities and backgrounds.

This game was seeming better and better. The graphics weren’t just gorgeous, the character animations were incredibly varied, too. I could feel myself getting sucked in little by little the longer I watched.

“All right, you two, stop flirting. Tell us about that light,” said Lyra.

“We weren’t... Anyway.” Chem cleared her throat. “That light came out of my

holy book.”

She held out her book to show them. Just then, the PC beeped, and some text came up on the screen.

“You are these villagers’ God, the one who must lead their community and help it flourish. You cannot control the characters, but you can write a new prophecy in their holy book once a day. Try writing something now. Anything will do.”

“Wait—there’s no list? I gotta write something myself?”

That was so weird! Was the A.I. in this game really capable of understanding any message I put in? That seemed totally impossible.

Maybe the program just selected keywords from my input to dictate the characters’ behaviors...but even that seemed beyond the capabilities of a normal video game. I’d heard of an A.I. that could think and learn, but it was part of a multimillion-dollar research project. It had nothing to do with video games.

“I’ll just try it out. I can worry about how it works later.”

I typed the longest, wordiest, most godlike sentence I could come up with. Then I sat back and waited to see what would happen.

Chapter 2:

The Game's God and the Real Me

I ENDED UP WRITING a long prophecy for my villagers, just to see if they could understand even one fragment of it. If they could, this game had the potential to make history.

"My devoted followers, I am the God of Fate. My miracle delivered you safely from the monster attack so that you might live peaceful and happy lives in the village you will build here. From this day forth, I shall impart unto you one message each day. Follow my commandments and thrive; disobey them at your peril! Your first task is to fell trees to build yourselves some shelter."

I didn't like writing in such a pretentious way, but I was God, wasn't I? Or at least, *a* god. And it was kinda fun—I'd planned to just write whatever, since they wouldn't understand anyway, but I got so into it that I even checked my work for typos. I shook my head wryly as I pressed the enter key.

The book in Chem's hands lit up. She hurried to open it.

"So it *was* He who performed that miracle earlier... Lord, thank you!" Chem dropped to her knees and put her hands together, facing toward the sky. "Everybody! The God of Fate has sent us a message!"

Chem seemed awfully surprised for someone whose *job* was to take messages from God. The villagers gathered to peer at the book. I waited eagerly for their reactions.

Gams and Rodice stared at it in astonishment, their eyes wide.

"What does it say? Neither Carol nor I can read," said Lyra sheepishly.

"We can't read!" Carol echoed happily.

"I can only read some of it," said Gams. "It's a little complicated in parts."

Chem, could you read it for us?”

“But Gams...” Chem began, but then she nodded. “That’s a good idea, Gams. I’ll read it aloud.”

Judging from Chem’s reaction, Gams was only pretending to be bad at reading, probably so Lyra and Carol didn’t feel bad. He was a pretty quiet guy, but it seemed like he had a good heart. I’d hated him a little at first for having so much going for him, but I found myself warming up to him.

I liked how much time this game was spending on tiny details. Some people might say the pacing was too slow, but I liked this kind of character development. I wasn’t one of those gamers who wanted to skip straight to the action.

Chem took a deep breath and read my message to the others word for word. I wasn’t too impressed with just that. It probably wasn’t difficult from a programming standpoint to have a character repeat exactly what I wrote.

“The Lord saved us! He cares for us! What a joy it is to be alive!” said Chem.

“And He’ll speak to us every day! Oh, Lord, thank you!”

Rodice and his wife fell to their knees beside Chem. Carol, too—though I wasn’t sure she understood what she was doing. Gams closed his eyes and bowed his head in silent prayer.

“No way...” I muttered.

They were reacting as though they’d understood every word I’d written. This game seemed *way* too advanced. It was really in its own league—unlike anything I’d ever encountered. I’d used apps that could answer simple questions and search for things on the Internet for you, but I doubted they could understand something so complex. Maybe the game had pre-scripted scenes based on the kinds of messages people were likely to write and I’d triggered one?

“If the God of Fate says we must build shelter here, let us do so!” said Gams. “Let’s get chopping.”

Or maybe these characters really *did* understand everything I’d written.

“Any trees we fell will be too green to use for some time,” said Rodice. “They’ll need to be shaped and dried.”

I was surprised by this turn of the conversation. A normal game would leave out those details and let you turn wood into housing at the click of a button. Just how realistic was *The Village of Fate* trying to be?

“Must we really dry out the wood?” Chem asked exactly what was on my mind.

“Trees have a lot of water in them. If you don’t dry wood before using it, it ends up warping. Even trying to process the wood before drying will cause your finished product all sorts of issues.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.” Chem and I both nodded in understanding at the same time.

That was news to me. So far, I wasn’t doing a very good job of being an omniscient presence.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways. He must know what He’s doing. Why don’t we start by collecting the wood? Even if we can’t use it straight away, we can begin gathering it.”

I’m glad Rodice has faith in me, at least...

They unpacked the cart to fetch their saws and axes, and put the men, Rodice and Gams, in charge of collecting the wood. Meanwhile, the women went off to search for food.

Scrolling the mouse wheel allowed me to zoom in and out. I decided to check out the map. When I scrolled out, I found that most of the map was covered in the fog of war, the only illuminated areas being where my characters worked and a peculiar winding route through the forest. In other words, the map only showed areas my characters had already been.

“Tomorrow, I’ll send someone out to explore.”

I was starting to get frustrated. I couldn’t control the characters, and I couldn’t advance the game—there was no fast-forward option.

“Don’t tell me this game has to be played in real time... Does that mean I

gotta wait till tomorrow *in real life* to send my next message? There's no way!"

Where was the fun in that?! Sure, it was pleasant enough to watch the individual characters, but I'd hardly call that "playing" a game. I pressed random keys on the keyboard, hoping to make something happen. I must have done something right, because a message appeared.

"As the God of Fate, you can use your Fate Points (FP) to perform various miracles."

"What are Fate Points?" I asked aloud.

"Fate Points are earned when your villagers' gratitude towards you increases. Your total FP is displayed in the top right corner of the screen."

I had a look. There was a symbol that looked like Chem's holy book, along with a number.

"As your village's population increases, so will your FP. It will also increase when your prophecies earn the gratitude of the villagers."

So I'd earn more FP if my prophecies were helpful. I'd have to think more carefully about what I wrote in the future.

"This is a list of miracles you can perform. As your village improves and your population increases, you will unlock more powerful miracles."

My opinion of this game was going up and down like a seesaw. With this new development, I found myself hooked once more. I scrolled down the list of miracles.

"Doesn't look like I can just give them items. Let's see... 'Spawn a traveling merchant,' 'Spawn a traveling physician,' 'Spawn a hunter,' 'Reunite with escaped villagers.' Right, I get it. I'm the God of Fate, so my power is all about influencing the fates of people. Ah, and there are some weather-related miracles. Guess that's a pretty godlike thing to do."

Finally, something that counted as gameplay!

I only had 100 FP to start with, maybe from earning my villagers' gratitude for helping them escape the monsters. It made sense that the game would start you off with a little to play with, but it wasn't enough to do much. I had to

choose carefully. I decided to save them, even though I really wanted to try a miracle. After all, I didn't know what my villagers needed yet. I should probably listen to what they had to say before sending any miracles their way.

Gams and Rodice were busy chopping trees in silence, and it didn't look like I was going to get much out of them. Though Rodice was trying hard to make conversation, Gams wasn't replying with much more than an occasional "yeah."

"Good luck, Rodice," I muttered, deciding it would make more sense to see what the women were doing for now.

"How much food did you manage to take, Lyra?" asked Chem as she and Lyra picked plants together.

"Three boxes, so about two weeks' supply as long as we're careful. Which is a miracle, given how bad things looked."

"Two weeks... That'll go by in a flash."

Food, huh?

I wondered if the traveling merchant would sell food, but I didn't even know if my villagers had any money. They might be perfectly capable of gathering their own food if I just left them to it. What I really wanted was to know what options they had for gathering food in the area.

"Maybe I should make Gams do some recon tomorrow? But I dunno if it'd be safe to leave the others by themselves..."

By searching the surrounding area, it would be easier to prepare my villagers for possible threats. At the same time, I didn't know what was out there. It might be more dangerous to split them up.

I didn't know what to do. From a gaming perspective, sending the kid to explore the area would be the best choice, since she wasn't really doing anything. She was pretty much useless to the village, so if something killed her, it wouldn't be such a big loss.

I couldn't bring myself to do it. These characters just felt too human—I couldn't send a little kid into danger and live with myself. They were all working so hard, making the best of their lives. If I took those lives for granted, they'd

grow to hate me.

Sure, it was just a video game, but I still wanted to see how each of them would grow and develop.

I've only been playing for three hours, and I'm already attached to them... I won't be able to sleep tonight if I put them in danger.

What would be the best thing for them, in terms of their survival? I took another look at the list of miracles to see if anything could help. Their biggest problem right now was food. After that, it was making sure they had the right tools and materials to make themselves some houses.

"Wait, what's this?"

Underneath the list of miracles was a final option: "Familiars."

In fantasy stories, familiars were servants who helped out their magical masters by fetching objects or gathering information.

"Gathering information!"

If I got myself a familiar, maybe I could use it to scout more of the map!

I just hope I can afford one with the FP I have.

Clicking the button led me to a list of available familiars. I scanned the list. There had to be at least fifty of them!

"Dogs, cats, mice, lizards, frogs, snakes, bats, crows, pigeons..."

The list wasn't just regular animals, either. There were a good number of fantasy creatures, like unicorns and slimes. I had about enough FP for a frog, a mouse, or a lizard, but with a tiny thing like that, what could I really do? It might get eaten by something the moment it stepped foot in the woods. If I wanted to explore the area, a bird would be best, but they were all pretty costly. I could only afford a chick right now.

"Useless...unless my people like eggs. It'll be a while before it could lay any, anyway."

A cat or a dog would be good, too, but I didn't have enough FP for them. I wondered if there was any way to earn points apart from the gratitude of my

villagers. As though the game read my mind, a message suddenly appeared on the screen.

“You may purchase FP with real-life currency. 1,000 yen will buy you 10 FP.”

Great. And here I was, unemployed and broke. *Of course* the game had microtransactions. I should’ve expected this, but I was pretty cheesed off that they put them in the alpha version of the game.

If I bought 20,000 yen worth of FP, I would be able to afford a cat or a small dog. And in general, having more points would make my villagers’ lives much easier. I grabbed my passbook from the small case next to my computer and opened it.

“Only 10,000 yen, huh? Maybe I could sell some old books or games. Or I could auction off some of my unopened prizes online...”

I sat there considering it for a long while, ignoring the little voice in my head that told me I was putting too much stock in the lives of a bunch of pixels.

Chapter 3:

Investigating the Game and Its Point System

I DECIDED IT WOULD BE BEST to find out more about the game mechanics before I invested any money. The first step was to make a list of things I'd already learned. I opened the notepad on my PC and began to type.

"1. The game works in real time. No fast forward. Gameplay is bare-bones and lacks many standard sim features."

I wondered why the devs had failed to implement even the most basic sim game features—there was so little I could actually *do*. Sure, there were games out there that built a reputation for being especially difficult or opaque, but this seemed extreme. I was surprised this didn't come up in development—I wished they'd done their jobs properly. *Not that I can judge anyone for being bad at their job.*

"If I wanna see what they do in the morning, I'll have to get up early... I guess I'll have to go to sleep at the same time as they do."

I had a bad habit of talking to myself while trying to gather my thoughts, or while playing games and watching anime. The only person I really spoke to in real life was my mom. All my friends were online. I suspected I'd started doing it to distract myself from how lonely I was.

"If anybody heard me, they'd probably think I was super weird."

There I go again...

"2. The daily prophecy. Innovation or gimmick? I can only send them one message a day, which they receive through their holy book."

“Maybe I just got lucky the first time. I wonder whether they’ll understand whatever I tell them tomorrow.”

I’d have to think about my message carefully, especially if my villagers were only picking out keywords like I thought. Although, even that was impressive enough for a game like this.

“3. Fate Points (FP) are needed to perform miracles. They can be earned through villager gratitude or by spending real life money via microtransactions.”

“I can’t tell if 1,000 yen for 10 FP is worth it or not yet...”

I already had 100 FP, and 1,000 yen would only get me a tenth of that. That didn’t seem like much, but I’d know for certain when I learned how much I could earn in a single day.

“4. Miracles. By spending FP I can perform miracles, most of them tied to the fates of people, not getting them useful things. Once they start farming I can send rain—and I can also buy a familiar.”

I couldn’t wait to buy a bird or monster to tame and use as my eyes and ears in the game world.

“5. NPCs. The NPCs in this game are very realistic. They can understand what I say to them, and they have natural-seeming conversations.”

“The most interesting part of the whole game...”

The behavior of the NPCs had really caught my attention. The way they understood the daily prophecy was incredible—there were games where the character on-screen would react to certain words the player said, but those words were generally very limited, and the responses preprogrammed. Even

digital assistants weren't at this level yet. But even besides that, their conversation was so natural and varied. They never said the same thing twice, which was something I'd never come across before—and I played a lot of video games.

Each character had their own personality and their own way of speaking and moving, too. Gamers were used to seeing characters doing the same thing over and over, but this game had none of that. Their movements were just as varied as their speech.

Of particular note was Carol, easily the most active of the villagers. She hopped, ran around, walked, skipped, fell, and even held back tears. She reacted to everything that went on around her. The characters' faces were also impressive—apart from Gams, I could read what each of them was feeling from their expression at any given time.

"Is this a new thing?" I wondered aloud.

Graphics were only improving as time went on, with some games getting very close to lifelike. I also heard on the radio that voice actors these days had to read through the thickest scripts known to man just to record every possible vocal reaction. That was for an entire game, though. In half a day of playing, it already felt like I'd heard more conversations from my characters than most games had in their whole runtime. They were just too human for me to believe they were part of a program. None of their behaviors seemed programmed at all.

"I guess people weren't kiddin' when they said A.I. was getting too independent for its own good." I couldn't imagine what else this could be. "Or maybe this is normal, and this stuff got way more advanced while I was stuck inside..."

Everything I knew about society came from the Internet. I wasn't interested in the news at all, and my entire search history was devoted to games and anime. Maybe if I watched TV I'd have a better idea of what was going on in the world, but I didn't have one in my room. All I'd ever needed was my computer.

That wasn't ideal, though. "Maybe that isn't great, after all."

As a shut-in, I had a narrow view of the world. I knew so little about current

events that I doubted I could have a conversation with a “normal” person my age. I hadn’t spoken to my childhood friends for years. What would we even talk about?

I was about to fall into a negative spiral. To try and stop myself, I stood up and went to my window.

I gazed across to the neighbor’s house. It was a traditional Japanese one-story. I used to go there to play as a child. Now, I had no contact with my friend who’d lived there.

There was nothing respectable about the reflection that stared back at me in the window, either. What sort of man sat at home midday on a weekday, unless it was his day off after working weekends? It had been years since I’d left the house. I barely shaved and cut my hair maybe once a year. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d bought clothes or shoes. My mom bought me underwear once a year, but everything else was very old.

I needed to make a change. I thought about it all the time, stirring up the anxiety that settled constantly in the pit of my stomach, but I didn’t know what to do. It was easier to lose myself in the world of films and video games.

Ten years. 3,650 days, all exactly the same. It was enough to make me want to end it all. But if I was too scared to find a job, how on earth was I supposed to find the courage to kill myself?

“It’s already been ten years... I should give up.”

Nobody expected anything of me anymore. Not even my family. When my mom yelled at me to get a job, she knew nothing would change.

I sat back down at the computer and stared at the game screen. I decided to play. Might as well. There was nothing to do.

Chapter 4:

The Hardworking Villagers and Their Lazy God

“**M**ORNING already?”

I yawned, glancing at the light spilling out from under the curtains. I checked the clock by my pillow. It was 9 a.m.

“9 a.m., huh? Been a while since I’ve gotten up at such a normal time.”

Usually, it was afternoon before I opened my eyes. I tried to remember what time I’d gone to bed. I’d played *The Village of Fate* far into the night. Though I supposed it wasn’t really *playing*, more like *watching*. I learned a lot, though—including that my villagers went to bed ridiculously early!

As soon as the sun went down, they ate their dinner and went right to bed. Gams stayed up to keep watch, but even he was in bed before nine.

I was a little concerned by their reliance on God—me—however. Their extreme devotion seemed like a good thing at first, but I heard a conversation that made me uneasy:

“Why not go to bed, Gams?”

“We don’t know when a monster might attack, Rodice. We need someone on lookout.”

“God performed a miracle right in front of us and spoke to us directly! He watches over us. He’ll keep the monsters away.”

“I hope so...”

I wanted to tell them that I wasn’t *that* powerful. I wondered if they thought I could always keep them safe. They assumed that my wood-chopping command was laced with significance and that I had some plan to make up for the logistical problems, after all. They all thought I had everything figured out. “I hope they don’t start thinking I can keep them safe all the time. Maybe I should tell them I’m not actually all-powerful...though if I did that, their gratitude would probably go down, along with my FP...”

It was quite the dilemma. Desperate not to disappoint, I ended up searching online for info about how to process wood, until I eventually dozed off.

Maybe if I hadn't wasted ten years of my life watching videos, scrolling social media, and trolling message boards, I'd actually have something of value to tell them. Maybe I'd even know how to process all the stupid wood they'd chopped. At the very least, I'd have some savings I could use on FP. If their God was a functioning member of society instead of some lousy shut-in, their lives would be much easier.

"Games are supposed to be fun! They aren't supposed to make me worry about my life choices!"

Games were supposed to be an escape from reality. But my villagers were giving their all. Even Carol—I'd overheard another conversation last night, too.

"Carol, you're so little! No need to push yourself."

"Being little is no excuse, Father," Carol had said. "I wanna do my part!"

"You know you can ask me for help if it gets too tough, right, Carol?" Rodice reminded her gently.

"Thanks, Father! I'll be fine, though!"

Even as Rodice gave everything he had, he still made sure his daughter was doing okay. I watched him decide to go help her, then stop himself, several times over. And Carol, young as she was, worked without a single complaint.

I knew it was just a game, but these characters really seemed alive. More alive than me, anyway. I always shied away from honest work. Watching them try so hard while I sat and did nothing made my chest feel tight. Each step they took and each load they carried was like a fresh cut to my rotten heart.

I looked around the room. Candy wrappers on the floor—they were the remains of a treat my mom bought to try out herself, only for me to snatch them away and gobble them up. All I'd achieved in the past day was creating trash. Dirty dishes. Laundry piles. Frankly, my daily prophecy to these people should be that they ought not expect too much from me.

If they put too much faith in me, it might stop them from acting at a critical

moment and the village could be destroyed. I only had one shot at this game, after all.

I took a long time coming up with a message that would make my villagers understand my limited powers without causing them to lose faith in me. I only hoped it would be enough. I watched anxiously as my villagers read my daily prophecy.

“Everybody! The Lord has sent us another message!” called Chem, causing the others to stop what they were doing to gather around her. “I shall read it to you. ‘My dear devout believers, I have lost some of my powers. All I can do is watch over you with love and occasionally perform small miracles. You must work together to survive. That is my dearest wish. If you do so, you will receive my blessing.’”

Their silence was long and awkward, and I watched with bated breath, hoping it would go over the way I intended. I could hear nothing through my computer speakers except the tweeting of birds and rustling of trees. I wondered what was going through their heads. Maybe they’d already seen through me and lost their faith—it honestly hurt to watch. I should’ve come up with something better, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

“Oh, how wonderful! The Lord loves us and is watching over us! Thank You, Lord!” Chem, overjoyed, fell to her knees and began to praise me.

“He performed a great miracle for us, even without all His powers! And He has given us His blessing, unworthy as we are! I am sure He lost His powers in some great struggle against the forces of evil—yet He performed a miracle for us anyway, even in the midst of His plight!! We must work hard and not burden Him!”

Thanks for covering for me, Rodice!

I was impressed at how much exposition he was able to lace into his praises of me. It looked like I’d convinced them. I let out a sigh of relief. As my villagers continued to thank me, I noticed my Fate Points increasing.

“So the daily prophecy *does* have a direct effect on my FP.”

My FP went up quite a bit as I watched—my villagers must have been really pleased with me. I still didn't have nearly enough to get the familiar I wanted, though. I started with 100 FP yesterday and gained an additional 110 today. I was expecting maybe 50 or so daily, but it seemed I underestimated. Still, miracles would be in short supply for a long while yet. I could probably afford around one a week. It really didn't feel like enough. My villagers needed a lot more than I could offer. For example, the women wanted a proper place to sleep.

"The cart is so drafty and not very safe, either—I wish we had somewhere else to sleep! If only we had some sort of fence or wall to protect us from monsters. It would make it easier for Gams to protect us, too," said Chem.

"I'm worried about food storage. If only we had some extra salt," replied Lyra.

Most of their conversation was about what they needed to survive. If I had more FP, I'd be able to sort out at least some of their worries. But I couldn't waste any right now.

"I guess my only choice is to pay up..."

I'd put my unopened prizes up for auction online. If they all sold, I was probably looking at around 30,000 yen, tops. I could sell my manga and games at a secondhand store, but that would mean going outside. The last time I'd gone outside in the daytime was about two years ago now.

I glanced back at the screen. My villagers were becoming more and more human to me as I watched. They were working hard to survive. Things were going well, but it was still early game. There was no telling what would happen—though I was pretty sure it'd be interesting. I hated the thought of them dying before I got to see any of it.

I had to help them, and for that, I needed more FP. Was this how whales felt, I wondered, when they threw their money again and again at their online games?

"Guess I'll head out..."

Taking off my sweatshirt and pants, I changed into more appropriate clothing.

Everything felt a little tight on me. I hadn't gained weight, I was just unused to wearing something so restrictive. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a sloppy thirty-year-old who was dead inside.

When I was a kid, I thought being an adult meant being a respectable person with a good job, and maybe a family. I thought I'd grow up to be like them. Instead, here I was. I looked like an adult, but inside, I was still a kid. Maybe I was even less responsible than a kid. Back then, I'd gone to school and stuff. All I had to show for these past ten years were the skills to play games and write call-out posts online.

Even now, my brain was telling me I didn't have to do this, that I could take off these clothes and roll back into bed. Normally, I would have listened, deciding I could try again tomorrow, pushing all my hopes off just one more day. But today was different.



I looked back at my villagers. Rodice and Gams were stripping the bark off of logs in amicable silence. They worked so hard, but I never heard them complain. Chem was out searching for food—I'd heard Gams mention that she didn't have much stamina, but that didn't stop her. Lyra was washing clothes at the nearby river. The water must have been cold; she kept blowing on her hands to keep them warm. Carol was helping wherever she could, smiling all the while and never once mentioning her empty stomach.

My job was to provide for them, now. Even if they were just game characters, I felt a responsibility to them. They were the push I needed. I left my room and went down the stairs. When I passed the living room, my mom spotted me.

"What's this? You're going out?"

"I'll be back soon."

"All right...have a nice time."

I could tell she was surprised, but she didn't ask me anything else. For a moment, I thought I caught a glimpse of a smile, but it was gone too quickly to be sure.

"See ya." Such a simple response, but I hadn't said it for months and months.

It was cold outside. I hadn't noticed it was winter. I spent my whole life in a climate-controlled environment, so I never paid any attention to the weather.

I unlocked my bicycle before hoisting my leg over the saddle. I was a little nervous—it had been such a long time—but in the end, my body remembered what to do. As I cycled through the neighborhood, I noticed the passersby talking to each other. I wondered if they were laughing at me, gossiping about a man my age, out in the middle of the day. The questions swirled in my head. I *knew* I was probably being paranoid, but I was scared. I couldn't deal with being ridiculed. It was probably just my imagination, but I could hear their laughter ringing in my ears, and it made me feel ashamed.

I wanted to turn the bike around and head back home, but I remembered my

villagers. They were probably hard at work right now. I wanted to make their lives easier, even just a little, so I kept my feet on the pedals.

I felt much more at ease inside the secondhand store, where nobody would recognize me. I did pretty well, too. I sold two bags full of manga that I'd read to death already and all my old games; the only game I needed right now was *The Village of Fate*. I didn't get much for them, but one of the manga titles now had an anime, so that sold for more than expected.

I was tempted to grab some fast food before heading back, as a treat, but decided against it. Instead, I did a little looking around the secondhand shop.

First, I picked up a woodworking book and a magazine about building with logs. The information was probably all online, but it would be good to have a book on the subject. You never knew what was actually true online, after all. As I continued to browse, wondering if there was anything else helpful, I ended up in the light novel section. It was filled with popular *isekai* novels. Most of these started out free online, which made them perfect for a broke NEET like me—free hobbies were all I could afford.

The print versions were edited and improved, and they came with illustrations, too. I really wanted to buy a copy of my favorite series, to support the author, but I just didn't have the money for it right now.

"In a lot of these, a guy brings his modern knowledge to a low-tech society and gets all the credit for it, right?"

My own situation with *The Village of Fate* was very similar. Maybe these would be helpful after all? I bought a few secondhand copies, just in case.

Even living rent-free with my parents, I was so broke I had to buy my books secondhand. What a depressing thought! Even kids knew you needed money to get anywhere in the world, but I'd been hiding from that truth all this time. All I wanted was to get back home. But on my way, I saw a patisserie that my family used to visit. Inside, a small family was picking out a cake with their child. They were all smiles.

"This might not be a bad use of my money..."

I stopped in and picked up four puddings that were always a hit with my family.

Chapter 5:

A Poor Man and the Broken Peace

WHEN I GOT HOME, I handed the puddings to my mom, who was still watching TV.

“Are these for us? Thank you!”

“I got enough for everyone.”

I couldn't take much more of my mom's smiling face, so I hurried back to my room. All I did was buy dessert. It wasn't like I came home with a winning lottery ticket. I was still the same useless bum I'd always been. Such a small thing shouldn't make me feel so proud.

“What the hell am I even doing with my life?”

Giving myself a brisk slap to snap out of it, I sat down in front of my computer. My villagers were working cheerily. With them safely on my screen once more, I began to leaf through the magazine and book I'd bought. I was eager to get some FP and perform a miracle, but if I didn't do my research, there was a good chance I'd waste it. I had to be sure I was making the best decisions for my villagers.

First things first, I decided to buy some FP, just in case. 20,000 yen or so should be enough.

The book on woodworking ended up being really engrossing. It was evening before I knew it. My villagers were now preparing for dinner. The day before, I'd found a function that allowed me to view their conversation history. I scrolled through it now, looking for anything I'd missed during the day.

“The weather is so lovely.”

“Yeah.”

“I hope we don't run into any monsters!”

“Me, too.”

C'mon Gams, Rodice is trying to get to know you!

Gams was an honest and straightforward guy, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for Rodice. It must be like talking to a brick wall.

It felt kind of sketchy, reading through their private conversations, but it was the best way for me to find out how to help. That was how I tried to justify it to myself, anyway. I opened the log.

“The laundry should dry soon,” said Lyra.

“It's nice to have the river so close,” replied Chem.

“I wouldn't mind taking a dip...but what if monsters attacked while I was naked?”

“Not to mention the men might come back!”

“I'm not worried,” laughed Lyra. “My husband and daughter have seen me naked hundreds of times, and I'm sure Gams wouldn't be interested in looking at an old married lady!”

That's right. Lyra was supposed to be thirty years old, the same age as me. Personally, I didn't think there was anything “old” about her. She had a nice figure and was pretty good-looking too, even for someone stuck in the wilderness without makeup or jewelry.

To be honest, I was pretty jealous of Rodice.

“I don't mind if Gams sees me either!” Carol announced.

Knowing how much Carol loved Gams, I wouldn't be surprised to see her ask him to join her in the river.

“Don't be silly, Carol. And I don't know about that, Lyra. My brother may be a gentleman, but he's still a red-blooded male!”

Chem must be more attached to her brother than I thought...

Their conversation was nothing mind-blowing, but I did learn a little more about where my villagers came from.

“I have to wonder...just what were those monsters that attacked our village?”

It was so strange, even considering the date. Then, just like that, everyone was gone.”

What did she mean by “considering the date”? I thought about asking in my next prophecy, but at the same time, I wasn’t sure it was worth it.

“Our village was big, our walls were sturdy and well built, and we had so many strong hunters like my brother. We should have been able to defend ourselves.”

“I wonder if the nice old couple next door is okay,” said Carol. Even just reading it as text, I could imagine how sad she must’ve sounded.

“The forest may be dangerous, but we’re out of options until we repair the cart wheels... I doubt they’d even carry us for a day in their current state.”

It seemed from scrolling through the backlog that my villagers had come from a village with a population of a few hundred, which was about average for this world. Then one day, a group of monsters attacked, and, though they tried to fight back, they barely escaped with their lives. Others had been with them, but they’d been separated when they’d veered into the woods, and now they didn’t even know their way back—if it was even safe to try. While they’d made it, the cart was pretty much destroyed. They were stuck.

Now it made sense why there was a miracle to “reunite with other villagers.” Maybe if I used it, I could get some more people to work in my village.

“Dinner’s ready!”

At the sound of my mom’s voice, I closed my book. For once, my dad was joining us for dinner; usually he worked much later. His hair was parted and gelled down in its usual style, and his eyes looked out coolly from behind his black-rimmed glasses. He was a blunt man who never said more than he needed to. He was a little like Gams, in a way. Our schedules were so different we only saw each other a few times a month, and we never had much to say to one another. After a big fight we had a few years ago, he seemed totally unconcerned with me—not unkind, just disinterested.

“Where’s Sayuki?” I asked.

“Working overtime. She said she’d be late.”

“I see.” That was pretty common these days.

Sayuki was my little sister. Even though she was quite a bit younger than me, she was already working in her dream field and had a smile on her face every single day. She actually *liked* working overtime. I wasn’t sure exactly what she did, but I think she was in admin or something.

“Oh, that’s right!” my mom said suddenly. “Okiku-san gave me some homemade pickles today. Would you like some?”

“Sure.”

“The weather was just so lovely that I went out to the park for a walk. That’s where I met her! We went shopping together, and she invited me in...”

My mom talked on and on about her day as me and my dad ate our food in silence, only adding the occasional interjection to let her know we were still listening.

It occurred to me that I was lucky to have what I did. We lived in a detached house away from the city. Right now, the nice big garden was more like a field, stacked with some old wooden shelving and chairs my dad built in his spare time, but he said he wanted to do something with it at some point. If my family had been poor, they couldn’t have endured the burden of a lazy son like me. Here, I had food, shelter, and even the Internet. Compared to my villagers, I had nothing to complain about.

After I finished eating, I got up to go back to my room when my mom stopped me.

“Why don’t you take one of your puddings up with you? Look, dear,” she said to my dad. “Yoshio bought these for us.”

“Did he? I’ll have one, then.”

I couldn’t tell if he was mad or happy, so I scurried up the stairs back to my room with my pudding in my hands.

Mom had waited for Dad to get home before serving dinner, so it was a bit later than usual today. All my villagers, except Gams, were already asleep in the cart. In the light of the bonfire, his face looked even stronger and more stoic

than usual. The village was lucky to have him. Chem's magic was all healing spells, and though I quite liked Rodice, he was clearly not well suited to fighting either physically or emotionally—he was more likely to run from monsters than attack them. Gams was the only fighter. I'd learned from reading my villagers' conversations that he used to make his living hunting monsters.

After learning their God wasn't all-powerful, my villagers had made the decision to take turns keeping watch for the many nocturnal monsters living in these woods. Just seeing Gams standing there, looking out for his fellow settlers, put me at ease. I was sure his appearance played a part in that. Dark hair and dark eyes. I didn't know how tall he was exactly, but judging from everyone else's height, he had to be approaching six feet, if not taller. He had both a long and a short sword, and was very capable of wielding them both at the same time. I picked up a lot of information about him from the conversations between Chem and Lyra. He was also extremely serious and quiet, and he never complained, no matter how unpleasant or arduous the task he had to do. I was sure he was the most reliable person in the village, and my villagers likely wouldn't have made it without him.

"I'm relying on him as much as my villagers. I should probably see if I can get some more inhabitants."

Five people weren't enough. I could increase my population using my Fate Points, but doing so was stupidly expensive. The cost varied with the type of character; there were merchants, soldiers, archers, civilians, carpenters... There was also a "Random" option. I knew the wise thing to do would be to steer clear of that. I didn't want to risk bringing them a criminal or something...and I also didn't want to get hooked on gambling for resources for my village. I'd seen how easy it was to lose a ton of money on gacha games if you weren't careful.

Besides, even if I did get some more villagers, they wouldn't have anywhere to live. There was no more room in the cart, so someone would have to sleep outdoors. Building a house where my villagers could rest easy had to be my top priority.

"A house..." I muttered to myself.

Should I spend all the money I made on a carpenter to speed up the

process...? Materials weren't a problem; they lived in the middle of a forest. There were already plenty of logs, and five of them were stripped of their bark. Gams oversaw chopping down trees, while Rodice was in charge of processing them. The logs were big, and we'd probably get a good number of planks out of them. The problem was, they still needed more time to dry properly.

And all that aside, I still really wanted a familiar. Plus, I felt that I should always have some FP on hand in case of emergency. I guessed I'd have to figure that out tomorrow...

No need to rush. I'd get more FP tomorrow, too. I felt bad leaving Gams to keep watch all by himself, but there wasn't really anything else I could do. I decided it was time for bed, so I could be up early tomorrow to decide on my prophecy.

Just then, I heard a weird pinging noise coming from the computer. I spun around to see the word "Attack!" written in red on the screen. Gams was unsheathing his two swords and readying himself for battle.

"Everyone! Wake up!"

The villagers' sleepy faces appeared from the cart at his call.

"What's the matter, Gams?" cried Chem.

"Monsters! Keep everyone in the cart, Chem!"

"Will Gams be okay?" Carol asked anxiously, sticking her head out.

"Don't worry about me!" Gams smiled at her.

Carol and her parents retreated into the cart as they were told. Chem clutched her hands together in front of her chest and set her worried gaze on her brother.

"I can fight—"

"Your job is to heal me if something goes wrong. For now, take care of the others."

Chem hesitated before nodding and following the others back into the cart. I wasn't able to see inside, but I could picture Rodice and his family huddling and trembling in fear. On the map, I could see pretty far, thanks to my villagers'

efforts in exploring. But the darkness of the night meant that only the area around the bonfire was visible right now.

Out from the darkness appeared two large, black wolves. I clicked on one to see what the game had to say.

“Direwolf. Relatively little is known about these vicious carnivores. They are said to be ordinary wolves that turned into monsters. Stronger than regular wolves, some even have venomous fangs.”

“I hope Gams’ll be okay... I know he’s strong, but it’s two against one.”

The wolves crept up to Gams, but he stood his ground. If he focused on one of the wolves first, things would be easier, but then he risked the other one going for the cart. The horses were tied to a nearby tree, but luckily it didn’t seem like the wolves were interested in them yet—instead, they split up to come at Gams from both sides, showing their intelligence.

“Please... Please win, Gams!”

All I could do was pray and watch. I didn’t know who I was praying to, though, seeing as I was supposed to be the God of this world.

“Wait! I *am* God! I should be able to do something!”

I hurriedly opened the miracles menu and scrolled through it as Gams began to make a move. The direwolves leaped at him. Gams swung both his swords at the same time. There was a slashing sound, and the next moment the wolves fell to the ground.

“Whoa!”

Despite his amazing feat, Gams didn’t hesitate to deal each direwolf a finishing blow. *Damn, Gams really is something!*

“Are you all right, Gams?” Chem asked as she ran over to him.

Gams put his hand on her head and smiled gently.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Take care of...everyone...”

Gams collapsed onto the ground.

I clicked on him frantically, wondering if he got injured without me noticing.

When I did, there was blinking red text on his status box.

“Poisoned.”

Chapter 6:

Panicked Villagers; Panicked God

GAMS'S VICTORY had looked so easy, but it came at a great cost.

"Hang in there, Gams!" I said through gritted teeth.

"Gams!" Chem cried, clinging to his body. "He's so cold..."

Rodice and his family emerged from the cart.

"It's okay, Chem—he still has a pulse," said Rodice, "but his body temperature is dropping, and he looks pale. And look at this wound on his arm... I don't like that color." Rodice stood up to study one of the fallen wolves. "He must have been poisoned. Chem, do you have any spells that cure poison?"

I felt my hopes soar at his question. Maybe my panic was all for nothing.

"I haven't learned anything like that yet. Do we have any antidote?"

"We don't, I'm afraid." Rodice shook his head and averted his gaze.

Lyra held Carol close as she watched. Realizing there was nothing they could do, Chem took her brother's hand. Tears were flowing down her face.

"If we lose Gams, it's all over for us," she whispered.

I tried to remind myself it was just a game as I watched my villagers grieve, but my heart was pounding and I felt close to tears. Honestly, I think it was only the fact that their dialogue was text, not voiced, that kept me from breaking down.

"Please, God! Save my brother! I'll do anything! Just please... Please save..." Chem burst into a wail, unable to finish her request.

God... That's right, *I* was God. There had to be a miracle I could use! Opening the list, I scanned it as quickly as I could—I was sure I'd seen something useful... "Not the merchant...not the hunter...*there!*"

I found what I needed: "Spawn a traveling physician."

Expensive as it was, I didn't care about the cost. I had more than 300 points now, thanks to the money I poured in today. That was just enough. If anything,

the high cost gave me hope it would be effective.

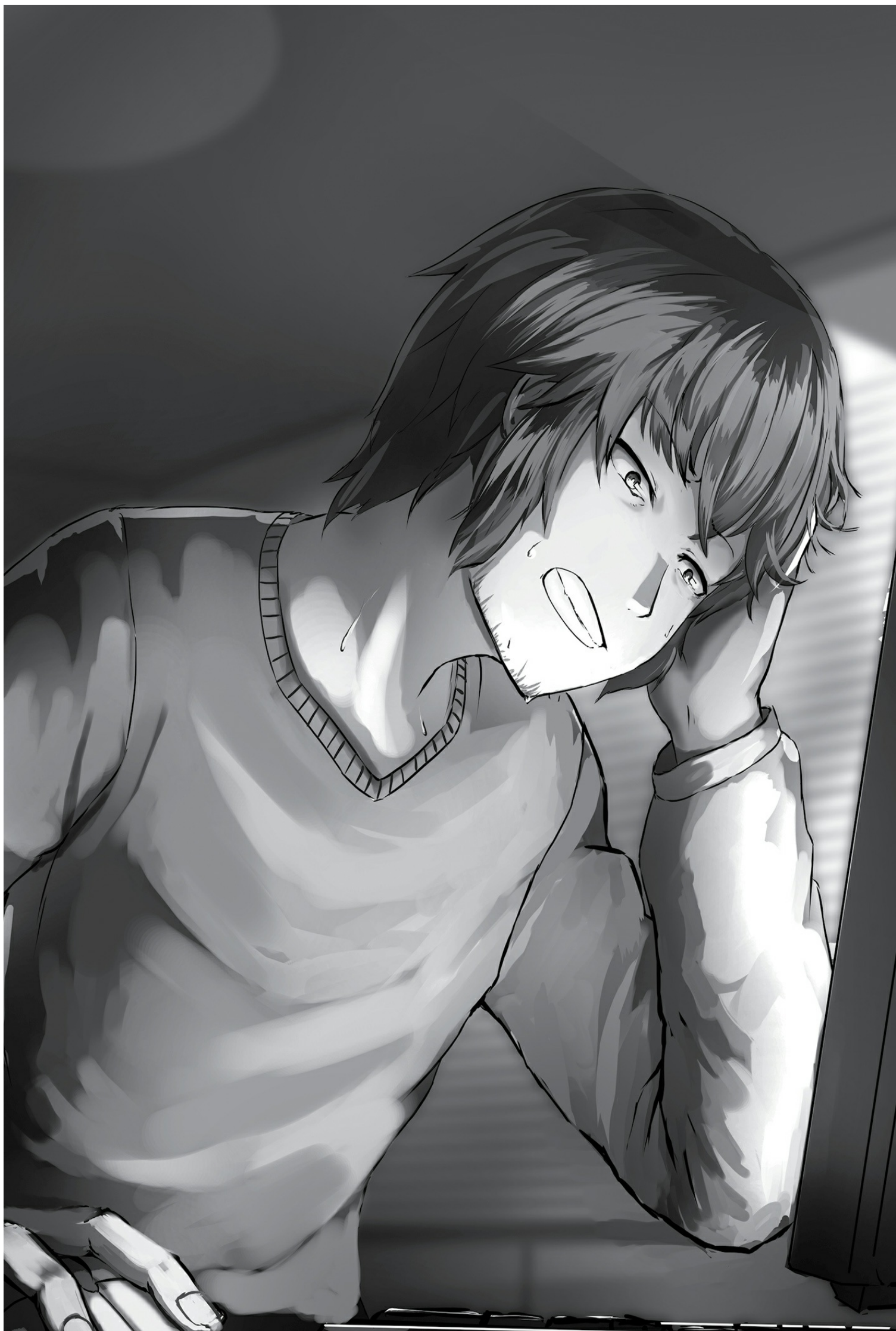
But will it really spawn the moment I perform the miracle? What if it spawns really far away?

“Please work!” My knuckles were white as I curled my fists up tightly.

“Keep it down, Yoshio!” Mom called up the stairs to me. I’d often stamp my feet on the floor in protest when she complained about the noise, but I didn’t have time to be so petty now.

“Wouldn’t it be kinda odd for him to suddenly spawn right away? What if my villagers don’t trust him? Wait...it’s past midnight!”

Thoughts whirled around my head like a tornado as I typed furiously.



“Can you hear me, Gams? Gams...”

“Is something the matter?”

My villagers turned around at the unfamiliar voice. There, on the other side of the bonfire, stood a young man. He had long, silky black hair, which perfectly highlighted his winsome good looks. In fact, I wasn't sure if this newcomer was male or female. His androgynous facial features didn't give much away, but if I had to guess, I'd say he was male. He wore a hooded coat and carried a large bag on his back. There were several small bags hooked on his belt. He had to be the physician!

“Who are you?!” Chem was on her feet, bravely getting in between her brother and the newcomer.

Rodice grabbed one of Gams's swords and took a defensive position in front of his family.

“Please don't be afraid. I am a traveling physician.”

My villagers exchanged wary glances with each other. It did seem too good to be true, so I pressed the Enter key on the prophecy I'd already written, causing Chem's book to glow. The book opened by itself, and words appeared on the blank page.

“God is speaking to us?” Chem peered at the book in astonishment.

She began to read, forgetting in her haste to read aloud. As she read, tears began to fall from her eyes once more.

“Thank you, God,” she whispered hoarsely before breaking into sobs.

I was glad I thought to send them a prophecy to explain.

“It seems I arrived just in time,” said the physician. “May I see your fallen companion?”

“Yes, please!” Chem cried without hesitation.

The other villagers were silent as they watched, still not fully understanding the situation. The physician checked Gams's wound. Pulling out a small bottle, he poured half of the contents into Gams's mouth and the other half into the

wound. His pained expression began to soften before our eyes.

“Thank God it worked.” I slumped back in my chair, the tension draining from my body as I unclenched my fists.

I was so glad the physician made it in time. Relieved, I turned my attention to the other villagers. Rodice and his family were watching Chem and the physician, looking bemused. Chem was so busy embracing her brother that Rodice picked up her book and began to read it himself. A glint of understanding finally appeared in his eyes. As I’d hoped, my ability to send a daily prophecy reset at midnight.

“I will show mercy for this brave warrior. It is not yet his time to join me. I have used the power of fate to send a physician to you. While there may be many hardships ahead, do not forget that I am watching over you.”

I tried to sound like a god as I wrote it, but I was so panicked I don’t know if I succeeded. Maybe if I’d set a casual tone with them from the start, I wouldn’t have to worry about writing so formally now—though I might also seem less godlike, which would mean they were less impressed with me. If I had the option to start a new game, I would’ve liked to give being a casual god a try.

“Good work, everyone.”

Though I sensed the danger was over, I continued to keep watch over my villagers in Gams’s place.

I watched until morning, even though there was nothing more I could do. I was glad to watch Gams as he slept peacefully, cured of the poison.

My villagers got up before six to set about their work. Chem looked after her brother. Rodice took a small spear from the cart and kept watch, aware he was the only man left fighting fit. Meanwhile, Lyra and Carol prepared breakfast together. The physician was still around, mixing medicines with a mortar and pestle. Chem kept shooting him glances like she wanted to say something but couldn’t work up the courage to do so. Finally, she let out a deep breath.

“Excuse me, Mr. Physician...but how did you happen to be here?”

The physician continued to sort his herbs as he spoke. “This forest is a dangerous place, but it’s also full of useful medicinal herbs. I was out gathering some last night, and just as I was preparing to set up camp, I saw a pillar of light. I felt that I ought to check it out, and I ended up here.”

“The Lord was guiding you,” Chem said.

“I do not believe in any god. I look only to the blessings of nature. That being said, I can offer no better explanation for what happened last night.”

So the physician was a nonbeliever. It made me wonder about religion in this world—maybe the existence of God was taken as fact, but whether to follow Him was up to the individual.

“How soon must you return home?” Chem asked.

“I cannot leave my patient, though he seems to be past the worst of it. Would you allow me to stay with you, if just for a little while?”

“Of course. Stay as long as you like! Although, I’m afraid we can’t offer much in the way of shelter. Is that all right?”

Having the physician around would put me at ease. If only there were somewhere for him to sleep. The cart was already crowded. My villagers didn’t have a tent in their supplies, either.

“Maybe it’s time to use some more FP.”

It would probably be a few more days before Gams was fighting fit again. Even if Rodice *thought* he could protect everyone in the meantime, I didn’t have much faith in him. I couldn’t help but worry that there would be another wolf attack before Gams was back in commission. Right now, my villagers needed somewhere they could shelter safely.

I didn’t feel comfortable using my points after spending so many already, but I didn’t see another way.

Maybe I should spawn a merchant?

“There’s a cave nearby—actually, it’s an abandoned mine. It would provide ample shelter for us all, and there might be some useful items left behind by

the miners,” the physician said.

Whoa!

Finally, somewhere for my villagers to sleep safely! They agreed that this was a fantastic idea and set off at once for the cave. With Gams in the cart, my people followed the physician on the path to safety.

After only five minutes of travel, they arrived at their destination. There, against the sheer face of the mountain, stood a makeshift wall of slanted boards. They were arranged in semicircles of about three meters in radius, cobbled together to protect the entrance of the cave from the elements. Behind them was a set of double doors large enough to drive a cart through and a single smaller door like an ordinary entrance to a house.

“This large door is for cargo and large items, while the smaller one is the proper entrance. I believe it was originally an active mine, but when the miners found a better mining spot nearby, they used this place for lodging and storage,” said the physician as he opened the large double doors and motioned the others inside.

As my villagers and the cart entered the cave, the game screen changed: the roof became transparent so I could actually see inside.

“Damn, it’s bigger than I expected,” I said.

There was still plenty of space in the cave, even with the cart, horses, and villagers inside. There were also several tunnels leading off from the main area, their contents hidden behind doors. The cave was dirty, and it looked like no one had lived here for years. Still, compared to sleeping in a cart, it was paradise. My villagers sprang forward to investigate the cave, their eyes lighting up.

“There’s a little room over here!” Rodice cried happily, looking behind one of the doors.

“There’s even a small stream of spring water! And a stone oven! This place has everything we need!” exclaimed Lyra. “Well, then! Let’s get this place tidied up!” Lyra rolled up her sleeves as her daughter bounced around her happily.

I really owe him one.

Thanks to the physician, my villagers had a safe place to sleep. The boards that protected the cave were thick and reinforced with iron, and it would take quite a bit of force to break through them.

At last, my people could start building a real village.

Chapter 7:

The Perfect Brother and the Unnecessary Brother

AS GAMS RESTED, the rest of the villagers got to work. First, they picked one of the small bedrooms, cleaned it out, and put Gams in one of the abandoned beds where he'd be more comfortable. The physician stayed at his bedside to keep an eye on him as the rest of the villagers started the *real* cleaning. Lyra immediately took charge.

"Let's all do our best so when Gams comes out, he'll be amazed at how spick-and-span it is in here! Rodice, dear, please gather up anything we can't use and set it outside."

"Got it," Rodice replied. "I'll see if there's any junk worth repairing and make a note of it." I could tell from his reaction that he was used to his wife bossing him around.

"Carol, you dust the rooms, *except for Gams's*. And let's work *quietly* so he can rest."

"There're four rooms. I can share with Gams—I bet he'll let me share his bed!" said Carol, who then slapped her hands over her face in embarrassment when she realized what she'd said.

Chem was glaring at the younger girl through the crack in the door to Gams's room. Carol looked like she wanted to say something, but instead she spun around and got back to cleaning.

"I'm his sister, / should be the one to share with him," said Chem. "He lets her get away with way too much—he ought to learn how to tell her 'no.'" She kept muttering darkly as she worked.

Lyra looked like she was about to give Chem a task, but she thought better of it and moved on. I was glad that most of my villagers got along well. It was only Chem and Carol who had the occasional spat.

This cave was an absolute godsend (though I guess only indirectly). Even if

monsters made it in somehow, the different rooms could be closed off to protect them while Gams worked on driving them out. I was just about ready to let out a sigh of relief when I noticed something strange. There was a cloud bubble above Gams's head with the word "dream" written in it. I checked the physician to see his reaction, but he was ignoring it—most likely, he couldn't see it at all. I didn't really know why the game wanted me to know he was dreaming, but I clicked on it, not expecting anything to happen.

The screen went black.

What was this place? It looked like a gloomy alleyway in an unfamiliar town, all stone and metal with no trees in sight. Snow drifted down and settled lightly on the flagstones. There were lanterns hanging on poles on each side of the path that gave off a weak light. The night looked so chilly that I almost started shivering.

There, a young man and a small girl walked hand in hand. It seemed to me they should have been tucked in their beds, not out walking in this inhospitable place. The man's face was grim, and the girl looked like she would burst into tears any minute. He was dressed in leather armor, and the swords on his back and hip told me he was a swordsman. The girl was wearing a coat that was far too large on her and occasionally allowed glimpses of the pajamas she wore underneath.

"Where are we going, Gams?"

"Somewhere else, Chem."

So, these were younger versions of Gams and Chem. There weren't any scars on Gams's face yet, and Chem's was adorably round. The two of them seemed distressed. Something must have happened, and it must have been bad for Gams to be dragging his small sister out on such a cold night.

"What's going to happen to Mommy and Daddy?"

"Don't worry about them. They're not our parents anymore."

"But if we don't go home soon, they'll get really mad!" Chem looked down at the ground, her free hand trembling—and not from the cold.

“We’re not going home at all, so no need to be scared, okay?” Gams patted Chem’s head gently. The smile that accompanied his words wasn’t very convincing.

They must have been running away from home. It sounded like their parents were abusive.

The pair kept walking in silence. Chem’s pace was getting slower and slower, until eventually she stopped and squatted down on the ground.

“I can’t walk anymore.”

“Tired, huh? C’mon, I’ll give you a piggyback ride.”

Chem clambered up onto Gams’s back. Though she still looked sad, there was a small flicker of relief in her eyes. Gams moved forward at a gentler pace, taking his sister farther from home.

“Gams, why do Mommy and Daddy hate me? Am I bad girl?”

“Of course not!” said Gams, a little too loudly. Chem flinched at the sound. “That’s not true,” he said, more quietly this time. “You’re not a bad girl. They’re bad parents.”

“They said they were gonna sell me as a slave because I was bad... They said that since I was just gonna be there a few more days, I should be a good girl.”

This wasn’t just an innocent runaway attempt. I knew child abuse happened even in my modern society, but I’d never heard of something so awful before...

“Forget about them, Chem. They’re not our parents; they’re worthless. They don’t even have jobs. They just rack up gambling debts, and now they want to sell you to pay them off. I was gonna come get you once I was a full-fledged hunter, but really I should have acted sooner. I’m sorry.” Gams was glaring up at the night sky, regret clear in his eyes.

“I’m glad you came when you did.”

“Don’t worry. We’re gonna have lots of fun from now on, ’kay?”

“I love you, Gams!” Chem squeezed her brother tightly and buried her face into his neck.

Now I could understand why she was so fond of him and relied on him so much: he came to her rescue in her hour of need.

“No wonder everyone loves Gams. He’s good-looking, *and* he’s got a heart of gold.”

The dream faded, returning me to the cave.

I kept watching my villagers until I realized it was nearly lunchtime. I was starving, and my eyes were starting to feel uncomfortably dry. It was time for a break. But just as I walked out into the hallway, the door to the room next to mine opened, revealing my younger sister Sayuki. It had been a while since we’d run into each other like this. She was rubbing the back of her head sleepily, like she had only just woken up, but her expression changed the moment she saw me.

“Ugh, it’s you.” She scowled.

“You’re off today?” The question was out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

I had long since lost track of the days of the week. Thanks to *The Village of Fate*, it was getting even worse lately.

I guess that means it’s Sunday.

She worked late last night, which was why she was still in her pajamas now.

Just like Gams and Chem, my sister and I didn’t look much alike. People liked to tell us as much whenever we were seen together. It was probably because my sister was conventionally good-looking and I looked like a slob.

Back when she was in high school, she used to tell me about all the guys who confessed to her. She was even prettier now than she was back then—it was like I inherited none of my parents’ good features so she could have them all. Her lovely black hair fell just below her shoulders. Her eyes narrowed, almost repelling me by the look in them alone.

Even without makeup, she was pretty. I almost caught myself staring. If I weren’t her brother, I’d probably think she was even more beautiful than I

already did. She was still in her early twenties, and I couldn't help but be jealous—I wished I could be that young again.

The way she was looking at me told me I'd be in for an earful if I even glanced in her direction again. "I'm just going to the bathroom," I muttered as I shuffled away.

I didn't have much of an appetite for lunch anymore. I doubted she would either if I went down there.

"Don't use the downstairs bathroom, okay?"

I never felt like fighting with her, and I didn't think I had a right to, either. She was earning money for our family. I was just here wasting space.

"I know," I replied. Sayuki even hated the thought of sharing a bathroom with me and reminded me often, and now I stuck with the upstairs bathroom out of habit. It was closer to my room, anyway.

"Don't just say 'I know'!" Sayuki muttered under her breath.

She kept muttering to herself, but I didn't hear the last of it because she was already halfway down the stairs. Maybe she'd wanted me to argue with her. I didn't have the willpower to talk to her. She was always angry with me. We'd been close when we were kids, but like most good things in my life, that was a thing of the past. When I started getting disillusioned with life, she started treating me like a stranger. When I finally gave up looking for a job, she stopped talking to me altogether. Before all this, we actually went out together pretty often.

Now, we barely spoke. But I couldn't see what she thought I should have done differently. Maybe I should've...no.

I realized I was clutching at my stomach.

Dwelling on the past was pointless. I'd gotten used to my sister treating me like this, but after seeing the dream of Gams and Chem's past, it felt raw and painful today.

Gams looked out for his sister. I didn't. How could I *not* compare myself?

I knew Sayuki would prefer to have a brother like Gams. Returning to my room, I watched over my villagers late into the night.

As usual, they worked the whole day through without complaint. They were always there to support and take care of one another. Chem brought her bedridden brother a drink of water with a smile. They really did have a good relationship. If only Sayuki and I could be just like them...

“I want to change.”

My eyes widened in surprise as I heard the words come out of my mouth. I felt something splash onto the back of my hand, once, then again, warm and wet. Tears.

“So I’m crying, huh?” I stammered to myself. “I’ve got so many regrets...that I’m *crying* over them?! So why haven’t I *done* anything?!”

My words dissolved into sobs. I couldn’t stop.

part 2

CHANGING REALITY ↻

Chapter 1:

The Revered God and His Stingy Lifestyle

IT HAD BEEN THREE DAYS since my villagers moved into the cave, and Gams had completely recovered. He was well enough to help out with the heavy labor, and he explored the area by day and kept watch at night. Either the people in this world healed very quickly or their medicines were incredibly effective. Maybe the devs just knew that no one wanted to wait ages for their villagers to recover.

The physician's name was Murus. I was glad he had settled in with the villagers. While his long, black hair was tied up, I studied his face. His slitted eyes were long and narrow, and his nose perfectly straight. His body was slender and graceful. The way he spoke made me think he was a man, but his androgynous appearance made me wonder if he was a woman in disguise. If the game were fully voiced, maybe I'd know for sure.

Regardless, Murus was an excellent addition to my village. Not only did he have a deep knowledge of plants and medicine, but he was well acquainted with the local geography. He was also an excellent archer. With Murus and Gams keeping watch, I could sleep easy at night. And not only that, Murus could perform plant-based magic. He dried out my villagers' logs and got them ready to use for shelter. Honestly, he seemed kind of OP.

Magic was just a part of everyday life in this world. I'd already suspected that from Chem's healing magic, but the addition of a plant mage still came as a surprise. I wondered what other kinds were out there, waiting for me to discover.

Though I was happy to have summoned such a useful newcomer, not everything was going smoothly. Murus was being treated as a "guest" in my village. When I clicked on him, all I could see was his name. The rest of his information was blacked out with the word "secret" written on it. There were probably conditions I needed to fulfill to have him join for keeps, but so far I couldn't figure them out. I'd hoped that after spending 20,000 yen, I'd at least

get him permanently. I guess I just had to be grateful that he'd saved Gams...or that's what I tried to tell myself.

"C'mon, just join already..."

At least the cave was even better than I expected. It was a comfortable place for my villagers to live, and it was equipped to fulfill their every need. It lacked natural light, but there were bright lanterns lit by "light orbs," a special kind of ore in this world that glowed brightly. There were also pickaxes and blacksmithing tools left behind by the miners. There were even some weapons lying around. None of my villagers knew how to smith or forge, but I hoped at some point a new villager with those skills would arrive.

They were finally living like a real community. To be honest, the discovery of this cave seemed too good to be true, but I shouldn't have expected total realism from a video game. My guess was that whichever new character I summoned first would lead my people there. Even a game full of microtransactions had to have mercy on me at some point.

Murus knew which plants and berries were edible, and the nearby river was full of fish. Sometimes, Gams and Murus even came home with meat, which was good as they'd run out of the food they took with them from their original village. I figured the next step would be plowing some land for crops.

Rodice's family used to grow food back in their village, so farming knowledge was not a problem. The area around the cave was brimming with vegetation, so lack of fertile land wouldn't be an issue, either. The problem was that they didn't have anything to grow.

In most games, I'd just select a plot of land and my characters would start ploughing. A few days later, crops would grow, as if by magic. But *The Village of Fate* was not like most games. I wondered if maybe it was time to call a merchant.

Since the expensive act of calling Murus, I hadn't performed another miracle, so I'd brought my FP up again. My villagers were incredibly grateful to me for saving Gams, and I had already gotten back a fourth of what I'd used on Murus.

With my villagers living in relative peace, I skipped one of the daily prophecies. But they started fretting that I had abandoned them, and so I went

back to sending a message every day, even if it wasn't anything enlightening. It was a pain to come up with something new to say each day *and* to keep up the whole godly schtick. I even found some online videos of sermons to try and find stuff I could steal to tell them. I couldn't think of any new commands to give them, so I usually just sent them fluff to tide them over.

"My villagers, be sure you drink plenty of clean water every day. Rest when you are weary. Keep your bodies dry, for when the night comes, the damp shall make you cold. Taking care of your health is vitally important. Do not forget that."

That message made me feel like their grandpa—in fact, this was exactly the kind of stuff my dad's parents out in the country would say when I used to visit. But it was hard to come up with something profound every day. It was kind of a drag, honestly. I wished I could be more casual with my villagers, but I didn't want to confuse them. Anyway, I was more worried about what to do about my FP than with writing messages. The truth was, even if my villagers had needs and wants, I really wanted a familiar.

There was one in particular I couldn't take my eyes off. I clicked on it, bringing up the description.

"Golem. Humanoid. Understands basic commands and works an entire day without needing to rest. Can be controlled via gamepad."

Golems were a fantasy staple. Their main features were their large size and durable stone bodies. It wasn't just the potential fighting ability that attracted me but also that it could work all day. That would be a huge help for a small population.

Then there was the fact that I could control it. Finally, I would be able to do more than just watch and send messages. I wanted it so badly, but I couldn't afford it—even so, my mouse cursor kept creeping toward it before I stopped myself. Most miracles cost between 100 and 200 FP, but the golem cost a jaw-dropping 700 FP! That was 70,000 yen! Sure, I didn't *have* to pay for it...but right now I was only getting around 10 FP a day from my villagers. That meant

waiting almost two months, and performing no miracles in that time. I didn't have the patience for that, especially since I wanted to call a merchant to make my villagers' lives a little easier. And, of course, there might be another emergency...

If I could afford to buy FP it wouldn't be an issue, but my savings were completely wiped out, even my childhood savings and the remains of the allowance I'd received from my dad when we were still on good terms. Right now, I had 160 FP, which wasn't bad, considering I'd used a whole 300 to summon Murus. But gratitude could only get me so far. The snippets of advice I was reduced to sending only did so much. The other option was to add to the village's population, but again, that meant spending FP on a miracle. Were there ever random events where someone would join without my having to pay for it?

As I watched and mulled things over, my villagers gathered together. They were carrying the logs and doing...*something* to them—but what?

"Are you sure this is enough, Chem?"

"It's how we feel that counts, Gams. He watches over us, so I'm sure He'll understand." Chem squeezed her brother's hand.

They loved each other as much as ever. Sometimes, I could swear I saw something a little more intense than sisterly love in Chem's gaze, but I wasn't sure.

"So, you're building an altar with a statue of God?"

"That's right, Murus," said Chem. "I wish we could manage something more extravagant for Him, but a place to worship will be enough."

The siblings had created a statue out of logs, and it was impressive. It took a bit of squinting to work out it was supposed to be human shaped, but the effort they'd put into it made my heart glow warm.

"Please accept our humble gifts, Lord," Chem said, placing a bowl of fruit atop the altar. This type of fruit was popular with the villagers; shaped like pears but the same deep red as apples.

Except for Murus, each of my villagers stepped forward to pray at the altar. As

they finished, the fruit began to glow with a strong light. The light faded gradually, and when it faded, the offering was gone.

“Thank you, Lord,” said Chem in awe.

I was really surprised, but they took it in stride. If the existence of God was common knowledge, then disappearing offerings would probably seem pretty normal. Nothing said that the laws of physics had to be the same in a whole different world.

Also, y’know...it was a video game.

The graphics in this game were so realistic that I kept thinking I was keeping watch over a parallel dimension or something. I really needed to stop being so surprised whenever something fantastical happened.

The offering brought my FP up quite a bit, which I hadn’t expected. An explanation appeared on my screen:

“Fate Points increase when your villagers give offerings. The more valuable those offerings, the more Points you gain. Prosperous villagers will be able to afford more expensive offerings!”

What was I, their sugar daddy?

This was useful information. I could encourage my villagers to offer me anything and everything they didn’t need. I hadn’t sent my daily prophecy yet... This might be a good time to do it.

Even though more valuable offerings were better, I didn’t want to put too big a burden on my people. I decided to take a gentler approach.

“I have received your offerings. It gives me great pleasure to know I have inspired such gratitude. However, I do not wish for you to burden yourselves too heavily. Understand it is not only your offerings that please me but the feelings that come with them. These feelings and offerings are what imbue me with the power to perform miracles, but I shall be satisfied with the surpluses of your everyday lives.”

I looked back over what I wrote. Even though I tried to be humble, it still read as a little selfish. But my villagers were all simple, kind people. They wouldn't assume the worst of me.

I sent my message. Immediately, my villagers started marveling at how "modest" and "considerate" I was. Their straightforward acceptance of my words actually worried me a little. If they lived in modern Japan, they would be prime targets for scammers or cults.

In fact, wasn't that what was happening right now?

Anyway, I now had a new source of FP. Whether it came from leftover logs or even trash, I didn't care. I spent the rest of the evening searching for information online—how to process wood and how to play God when you're transported to another world.

Time passed in the blink of an eye. When my eyes started to feel dry, I turned to stare out the window, only to find the sun was already setting.

"This game really makes time fly..."

I'd just decided to take a break when I heard my mom call me from downstairs.

"Yoshio! You've got a package!"

Another prize? I sure was getting lucky lately. Though it was a shame I hadn't won the lottery.

I came downstairs to find my mom carrying a cardboard box.

"It's heavy. What did you order this time?"

"Nothing! Lemme see... Wait, what?!"

There was a small label with the sender's name on it. That name was *The Village of Fate*.

Chapter 2:

The Village and Its Suspicious Offerings

“IS THIS ANOTHER ONE of your prize things?” asked Mom.

I barely registered her question as a vague sense of panic started to set in. Was this somehow sent from the game world to me? No, that was stupid. As I kept telling myself, this was just a game! It had to be from the devs.

“I’m really starting to lose it...”

“What did you—oh my!” Mom gasped. “There’s fruit in here! What an odd shape. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

When she pulled one out of my package, sure enough, the fruit in her hand was identical to the fruit from the game.

“No way...”

“Where did you win these? They look wonderful! We can have them for dessert!”

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

Mom handed one to me before taking the box into the kitchen. I stared at it. There was no doubt that it was a real, honest-to-god fruit. I sniffed it. It smelled good.

“It must be some sort of new hybrid,” I said in a loud voice, mainly trying to convince myself. “Guess I’ll take a bite.”

I felt a little nervous, but it would be rude to my villagers not to try it—wait, no, it was absurd to think that they really sent it. But after one bite, all I could think about was how delicious it was. It was rich and juicy, the perfect balance between sweet and sour. And I felt fine after eating it—great, actually. With every breath, the refreshing, fruity scent came back to me. My family would love them, too.

I peered into the kitchen to find my mom had already unpacked the box and

left it by the trash. I peeled off the sender's label before heading back up to my room. No matter how many times I read the label, the words never changed. The sender was *The Village of Fate*. What I was more interested in, however, was the address. The original game package didn't have a return address, but this one did.

"Hokkaido, huh? Hmm..."

I googled it. The satellite image showed a small office building. It was an isolated place outside of a famous city I'd heard of. The building looked around five stories high, and the outside seemed quite dated. Did the team working on such a cutting-edge game really work from this eyesore of a place? Maybe this was just a small office for their marketing team, and development happened elsewhere.

So, my package had been sent from a real place. Too bad I didn't have the money or the guts to go to Hokkaido and actually check it out.

"Thanks for the gift, guys," I muttered, half-thinking it was probably their idea of a joke.

If it *was* a prank, they sure got me good. I thought the Internet connection requirement was just so you could buy FP, but maybe they were collecting game data, too. I was an alpha tester, after all, even if I did keep forgetting that fact.

Well, the fruit was delicious anyway, so I guess everything turned out fine in the end.

The next day, my mom hollered for me again.

"Yoshio, come here at once!"

Mom did not sound pleased. I raced downstairs to find her beckoning to me from the front door.

"Another package from this 'Village of Fate!' The fruit was nice, but what are we supposed to do with this?!"

She was pointing to a log. A log I recognized.

The previous day, I'd written to my villagers to thank them:

"My villagers, thank you for the fruit. Although I do not need to eat to survive, I can still enjoy the flavor of food. But please do not burden yourselves by sending more. Food is of vital importance to your survival. You may send offerings other than food when necessary, and you need not send them every day. Please put your own needs first."

It sure was hard trying to speak formally and warmly at the same time. Heeding my message, the next morning my villagers decided to send me one of their finest logs. It hadn't occurred to me that I'd really receive a log. The fruit had been a fun prank, but this? These devs were insane...

Even when it was lying there right in front of me, I had a hard time believing my eyes.

"I guess I'll put it in the garden," I offered.

"Yes, put those muscles of yours to good use," said my mom, closing the front door behind her and leaving me outside.

Finding some rope in the garden shed, I tied it around the log. It was as big as I was, so I pulled with everything I had. "Dammit! Since when is wood so heavy?" Despite the rough start, I did manage to get it moving. I hadn't been completely idle the past ten years; I'd kept up on exercise. I never expected it to come in handy like this, though.

Once the log was in the garden, I took a break. Despite the short distance between the front door and the garden, I was drenched in sweat. I started to feel bad for telling my villagers to chop down trees. I couldn't help imagining how it must've felt to drag all those logs around the forest.

Our garden was big enough that the log didn't get in the way, but I still had no idea what to do with it. Maybe I could sell it? But would I need a license... I'd ask my dad. He worked for an importing firm, so maybe he knew. Or maybe he'd want it—he was into DIY.

In any case, the game devs had proven that they were dedicated to the bit, but I was sure they wouldn't try to top this.

I figured the devs must be done by now, but the next day I was on my hands and knees in the front yard, overcome with despair. My villagers had sent me a package of meat. Vacuum-packed monster meat!

The moment I saw Gams and Murus take down a boar-like creature that morning, I'd gotten a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Once the offering of choice cuts had been placed on the altar, I broke out in a cold sweat.

"What is this 'Village of Fate,' Yoshio?" asked my mom. "This pork sure does look good, and there's plenty of it..."

I tried to think fast. Mom was studying the meat closely as she carved into it. "It might be boar. I took an online survey about alternative meat sources and fruit and whatever...for a little company in a small village. They went with my ideas, so they must be sending this stuff as a thank you."

"That's wonderful, Yoshio!" Mom clapped her hands together in joy. Well, looked like I was stuck with that story. I guess, technically, I *was* helping develop a village. And hey, I even had a job as a game tester!

Well, maybe not.

I wasn't about to say no to free stuff, but I couldn't help but marvel at the game devs. How the heck were they doing it? The villagers must only send certain kinds of things, which the company kept on hand. That still sounded kind of crazy to me, but I couldn't think of another explanation.

Maybe the official release of *The Village of Fate* would be marketed to rich people with too much time on their hands. People could easily drop 10,000 yen a month on it, with the microtransactions as extras on top. The price would be justified by players getting sent offerings from their village. They'd get tons of players—they could even collaborate with food companies. Just think what people would spend to get those exclusive fruits and meats!

"Get items from the game sent right to your door!"

I couldn't help but be impressed. I knew this was all a guess on my part, but it made a lot of sense, and it would explain the super-complex A.I. and the whole offering system. It also added a whole new interactive element to the game, making your villagers seem like ordinary, hardworking people. I wondered again why it was sent to me at all—did they confuse me for a rich person who could afford all the extras?

If I was right, it would be smart to get as much out of the game as I could before they realized their mistake. I returned to my room and sat down in front of the computer. As usual, my villagers were working hard. Every detail of their conversations was tracked, and the game showed every single tear and stain on their clothes. The way they moved, their expressions...it was all so natural and lifelike.

"It's just amazing new tech...right?"

A minute ago, I'd been so sure of my theory about the game and the developers behind it. But now that I was watching my villagers once again, I realized I wasn't so certain.

Chapter 3:

The Villagers' Hard Work and My Panic

AFTER TWO WEEKS of playing *The Village of Fate*, I was being sent an offering almost every single day. Some were great. Others, not so much. At least I warned them against sending anything illegal, like weapons.

"I cannot accept anything dangerous as an offering. Please keep your armor and weapons for yourselves."

I worried a little that my message would make the devs think I was taking the game too seriously, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about being sent a sword in the mail. Even if that would be pretty cool.

Still, it was the edible stuff I enjoyed the most. And my parents agreed.

My mom said things like, "Will they be sending more fruit? It was so good, and I even think I feel healthier when I eat it! Oh, and Sayuki just loved the meat they sent!"

"The meat was good," Dad agreed. "You can really tell the difference between hunted and farmed meat."

That was the most I'd heard my dad speak in years. He must have really liked that meat.

After that, I hinted to my villagers that their God of Fate favored food over other offerings. As a result, they sent us the pear-shaped apples again, plus a variety of different otherworldly produce. My personal favorite was the persimmon-like fruit that tasted like grapes.

That wasn't to say the logs stopped coming. We got our third one yesterday.

They also sent one of the light orbs from their cave. I answered the door for that package before my mom could get to it. When I inspected it in my room, it

looked like an ordinary rock—but it glowed. Even if it was actually a manufactured rock with a light bulb inside it, it was strange enough that I didn't want my family to see it, so I stuck it in the corner of my room and put a box over it so that its light couldn't escape. I took it out to use at night, though. It cut down on my electricity use.

When I began receiving these daily gifts, Mom stopped badgering me to look for a job. Our relationship started returning to how it was during my school years. I knew if I let my village get wiped out, I'd be back to square one, so I was working harder at the game than ever. I put tons of thought into coming up with the best ways to save my FP and how to get the most FP from my villagers' offerings. I even input my daily FP gains into a spreadsheet to count down the days until I reached my target amount.

I spent the rest of my time studying how to process lumber.

My father hadn't wanted the log, so I'd decided to do something with it. "This is harder than I thought. Maybe the book is wrong?"

I was facing off against the log they sent me. It was just sitting around, and if I learned some woodworking, I might discover something that could help my villagers. Unfortunately, it was already way too dark to do much. We'd already eaten dinner, and the light from the living room spilling out into the garden was all I had to work with. I pulled out a large lamp from the shed to cast a little more light on the matter as I scanned the page of the woodworking book.

Pull, rather than push your saw. Notice the direction of the grain of the wood...

It was all stuff that you needed to actually do to understand. Not everything was a matter of just clicking on things.

I shook out my hands and wiped the sweat off my brow. I decided to work for a little longer before taking a bath. I pored over the book, and before I knew it, the daylight ran out completely. I must have lost track of time, because when I looked up I found my dad watching me.

"What're you doing?"

"I thought I'd do something with this log instead of just letting it sit around. I

borrowed your tools...”

“That’s fine.”

Though he didn’t look like he had anything else to say, he didn’t move. With that poker face of his, I had no clue what he was thinking, so I decided just to carry on. With some effort, I managed to saw off both ends of the log. My first goal should probably be learning how to saw properly. I tried stabbing the saw into the wood again...but nothing happened. I then tried to pull it out, but I’d used so much force to get it in there that it was stuck.

“Let me see it.” Stepping into his sandals from the living room, my dad approached me.

He easily pulled the saw out of the wood and began to slice the log like it was a loaf of bread.

“Whoa...” I marveled at his speed.

“Your sawing technique is awful,” my dad said, not turning to look at me.

Most people would get mad at a remark like that, but I knew his words held a hidden meaning. I was his son, after all, even if neither of us acted like it. Anyway, actions speak louder than words—and that weekend, my dad helped me turn the log into a garden fence.

It was all thanks to *The Village of Fate*. I was supposed to be their God, but lately I got the feeling they were doing more for me than I was for them. After all, they’d been doing fine before I came along, but they’d given me a new perspective—a purpose, and a reason to change. I matched my sleeping patterns to my villagers, getting to bed by eleven and up by six. I checked on them and then ate breakfast after my father and sister left. Despite the improvements I’d made, I was still too ashamed to eat breakfast with everyone and see them off. I couldn’t watch them leaving for work like it was nothing when that was the one thing I never managed to do.

Once back in my room, I’d study while keeping an eye on my villagers. My reading wasn’t limited to carpentry anymore—I was now studying up on cooking and survival skills. I still wasn’t close to coming up with much decent

advice that I could give my characters, though.

For lunch, I'd use my newfound cooking skills to whip up something simple for myself—Mom went out every weekday afternoon, so I usually spent lunchtime alone. After lunch, I'd work out for a bit before coming up with and delivering the daily prophecy. The rest of the day would be spent planning how to use my FP, having dinner with my parents, and taking a bath. I'd then check out the village's surroundings before going to sleep. The next day I'd wake up, and the whole process would begin again.

The village was also going through a period of peace right now, compared to everything we went through at the start. In fact, I'd almost convinced myself that nothing was ever going to change...until it did.

"Looks like we're done with the fence now." Gams stood up after hammering in the final nail with a sigh of relief.

Since they no longer needed to build houses, my villagers had decided to use their wood to create a fence around the cave's entrance, and it was finally complete. It wasn't much more than thin posts and planks, but it would hold off any monsters for a little while—at least long enough for Murus to shoot them and the rest to escape deeper into the cave. Its existence was reassuring, if nothing else.

With the forest's generous bounty and the nearby river with its plentiful fish, food was still a non-issue. My villagers' stores were expanding. Winter would be there soon, and I'd already planned to stop asking for edible offerings when food shortages began. But for now, they were doing fine. They were smoking fish and meat to make it last, and they'd found salt in the caves to season their food, to Lyra's relief. Personally, I felt bad that they didn't have any pepper to go with it, but spices seemed to be a luxury in the game world.

They had shelter, food, and water. Everything should have been perfect, but something was wrong. They'd been acting strangely lately, almost restless. Gams was constantly on guard, and he jumped at even the slightest sound, especially while on watch. The other villagers were smiling less by the day.

"Their conversations are getting kinda awkward, too..."

There was a heavy gloom in the air. I often saw them looking at the wooden objects they each brought from the village (I'd worked out that they were calendars), sighing whenever they noticed another day pass. "Maybe there's a big day coming up. Maybe there's some tradition that's bringing them down."

But even after reading every scrap of conversation I could in the log, I still had no idea what was bothering them. That was, until a villager who was just as confused as me spoke up.

"What's wrong, Mommy and Daddy?" Carol asked one evening as everyone was settling down for bed.

Finally, I might get an answer! Thanks, Carol. I zoomed right in so I could see what was going on.

"Oh, nothing, Carol. Don't worry."

"Don't worry, your mommy and daddy are just as in love as ever!" They smiled and leaned into a mutual hug.

Carol narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "That's not it! Everybody's sighing and moping and acting all scared and stuff!"

Lyra and Rodice exchanged an anxious glance. They looked to Gams and the others for help, but they just gave some small, encouraging nods.

Rodice hesitated before putting a gentle hand on his daughter's head. "Well, Carol... We didn't want to worry you, but do you remember back in the village, when we'd tell you to stay inside at the end of every month and to go to bed early?"

"Yeah! I didn't like it, 'cause all the grown-ups were always grumpy on those days, and I wasn't allowed to leave the village, either!"

"Those rules were to protect you and the other children. You already know about the months of the year, don't you?"

"Yes. Every month, a different God looks over us! The God of Light, the God of Moonlight, the God of Fire, the God of Water, the God of Plants, the God of Lightning, the God of Snow, and the God of Earth!"

I noted that all down. Not only was it interesting, but it might come in handy.

Then I realized she hadn't mentioned a "God of Fate."

"You're such a clever girl to remember them all, Carol."

"But, Daddy, there are way more months than just those seven, right? There's twelve whole months, so we need five more Gods!"

You read my mind, Carol.

"That's a very good point! Originally, each God was in charge of one day of the week."

"Oh, I know this, too! Litday, Monday, Firday, Watday, Wortday, Snawday, and Erthday!"

So the way they kept track of days was very similar to ours. I guess it'd have to be for the game to progress in real time like it did.

"That's right, Carol. The Gods who take care of each day of the week are called the Major Gods. Then there are the many Minor Gods who work underneath them. The God of Fate, who looks over us, is one of them."

I wondered if I was supposed to answer to one of the Major Gods... That was an interesting question. Who would oversee the God of Fate, anyway? Maybe the God of Light, or the God of Moonlight...

"For many years, things were peaceful. But some of the Minor Gods became jealous and started a big war between the Major and Minor Gods. For the first thirty-one days, there was a powerful, terrible freezing wind. On the 120th day, the God of Plants gained the upper hand. On the 182nd day, the God of Water and the God of Lightning had a violent battle. On the 243rd day, the God of Fire raged, and so on. It took a whole year for the battle to end."

A year seemed either too long or too short for a battle between Gods—I always thought of mythological battles going on for hundreds or thousands of years. Even though the other villagers had likely heard this story before, they were listening just as intently as Carol.

"The Major Gods won and took charge of the world. Each God took over the period of time in which they did most of their work. And that is why we have seven Major Gods in charge of their months."

“But what about the Gods who lost?” Carol asked.

“The Gods who lost became known as the Corrupted Gods. They were sealed deep inside the earth, but they still live, and their power still grows. Once a month, they give some of their power to the monsters of the world, hoping to come back to the surface someday. We call that the Day of Corruption.”

“It’s always the last day of the month. That’s why it’s so dangerous to go outside. The monsters are even stronger and more vicious on that day,” Chem added.

With the explanation finished, the villagers got ready for bed. I didn’t know exactly how dangerous the last day of the month would be, but there was no such thing as being too prepared.

“I guess this explains all the angst lately...”

I clicked on one of the calendars in the cave. The days matched up with ours in the real world. Checking my own calendar, I saw that it was November 20th, which gave us ten days until the end of the month. So, the game was set up to have one big monster attack per month, it sounded like. It made sense that a game made with this much care would have special events fairly often. Even though I didn’t know how big the attack would be or what form it would take, I had to figure out how to help my villagers defend themselves.

Chapter 4:

The Villagers and Their God's Empty Day

WHEN I WOKE UP and opened my curtains, it was still dark outside. The clock told me it was only five in the morning, my old bedtime.

I was up early today because I had a purpose. I checked on my villagers to find that they were all still asleep. "Looks like I'm first up. Good, everything's going according to plan." Even at six someone was usually up and working, but I guess five was too much even for my villagers.

I spent a while coming up with this plan, and now it was finally time to put it into practice. Today, I was going to watch my villagers for the entire day... without lifting a finger. That might sound like what I did every day, but I usually spent a lot of my time looking up useful information on my second computer or reading through my books. But even though I could catch up with the backlog of conversation later, there was no information saved about what my characters actually *did* while they talked. That was why I decided to spend an entire day just watching my villagers and nothing else.

Lyra was the first one up. She got out of bed quietly so as not to wake Rodice and Carol, who were still fast asleep. She took a large pot from the kitchen and filled it with the spring water that flowed in nearby.

"It's so convenient to have fresh water right here. It makes the chores so much easier!" Lyra smiled happily as she dipped her hand into the stream. While they were still living out of the cart, she'd had to trek over to a nearby river, watching out for monsters as she went—this was clearly much easier and safer.

As Lyra started to prepare breakfast with experienced hands, one of the bedroom doors opened. It was Chem.

"Good morning, Lyra."

She looked remarkably alert for someone who'd just woken up, not sluggish in the least. She was clearly a morning person.

“Good morning, Chem. I’ve got everything under control here if you need more sleep.”

“I’ve had enough, thank you. Please, let me help.”

The two of them started to cook together. Despite the difference in their ages, they looked like sisters due to Lyra’s youthful looks and energy. When the food was nearly done, Chem took a cloth and broom from one corner of the cave and began to clean my wooden statue by the altar.

“Thank you for watching over us, Lord,” she said as she worked. I could tell from her expression that this wasn’t just rote for her—she expressed her gratitude from the bottom of her heart. I’d never seen someone clean with such a genuine smile on their face.

As Lyra went to fetch the tableware from a cupboard, more of my villagers emerged from their rooms.

“Good morning, Mommy! Let me help!”

Though her words were cheerful, Carol was still struggling to rub the sleep from her eyes. It was adorable. She really was a good girl. At her age, I always slept right until my mom woke me up. Not only that, but she was offering to help all on her own, which I’d *definitely* never done. Part of me wished I could go back in time and show my younger self what a model child was like.

They ate at a large wooden table near the middle of the cave. It was a simple thing, made of four logs sliced longways and attached to make a tabletop, but it was sturdy and quite useful. It had been left behind by the miners, and Rodice had fixed it and polished it up to make it usable again.

After putting the food on the table, Carol hung around the door to the room Gams and Chem shared. Gams was still asleep in there. Instead of bursting inside, Carol took out a small mirror from her pocket and began to study her appearance. It seemed her bangs bothered her, as a moment later she took out a brush and combed through them.

“She’s just like a teenager sometimes,” I remarked.

I thought her crush was adorable, but not everyone agreed with me. Chem kept glancing at Carol and scowling when Carol’s back was turned.

“And *she’s* just like a kid sometimes.” Chem’s possessive streak extended to anyone vaguely female who got near her brother, even a kid. I couldn’t relate to having a jealous sister, but somehow I didn’t think I was missing out.

Finally, Carol could wait no longer. “Gams! It’s time for breakfast!”

Watching Carol, I got the impression she was calling for Gams as sweetly as she could possibly manage. Chem proved me right with a frown. Lyra looked a little troubled by their conflict, but she didn’t say anything.

“Mornin’,” Gams said, emerging from his room and giving Carol the classic head pat. Gams could pull it off, but it’d probably come off as creepy if I tried it. Sayuki used to like it when I patted her head like that, but nowadays, she’d probably bite my arm off.

“C’mon, Gams. Chem wants one, too.”

Chem was watching from afar, absentmindedly patting her own head. Gams didn’t seem to notice her.

“Did you forget about me, Carol?” Rodice mumbled sleepily, making his way out of their room.

“Oh, sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, though his shoulders slumped.

“I gotta call Murus, too! Murus! Breakfast!” Carol yelled, scrambling up to the physician’s door.

“Thank you. I’m on my way.” Murus emerged from his room, rubbing at his head with his eyes half-closed. He was normally so put together—this sloppy, sleepy Murus was the total opposite of how he usually came off.

My villagers sat down to breakfast. Carol slipped in to take her place next to Gams. Chem was on his other side, of course. Rodice sighed at the sight of his daughter, while Lyra gently massaged his shoulders for him. Murus was watching everything with an amused glint in his eye.

Once breakfast was over, everyone got to work. Gams and Murus set off on a hunting trip. They weren’t just looking for food but also for any monsters that might pose a threat to the cave.

“D’you mind if we go a little deeper into the forest?” Gams asked.

“Not at all, as long as we don’t go too far. There are several dangerous areas that even I am not familiar with,” warned Murus.

Gams spent more time slaying monsters than hunting for food, probably because he was worried about the upcoming Day of Corruption. I was a little concerned that he was taking on more responsibility than he needed to. I wondered if I should tell him not to be so hard on himself in the next prophecy.

The villagers left at the cave were also hard at work. Lyra and Chem did the washing up and some laundry. Rodice counted their food supplies and took some notes on a piece of paper.

“Mommy! I wanna do Gams’s laundry!” Carol announced.

“Practicing to be his wife?” Lyra replied with a smile.

Carol squirmed in embarrassment. Rodice smiled down at her, but his expression was a little stiff, and there was sadness in his eyes. I figured any dad would have a hard time thinking about his daughter growing up and finding romance.

“How about you do *everybody’s* laundry?” Lyra asked. “Chem has some things that need washing.”

“Huh? No!” Carol pouted at the injustice of that request.

The strain in Carol and Chem’s relationship was obvious. Luckily, Chem was out hanging laundry to dry, so she didn’t hear Carol. She was smiling as she worked in the warm sunlight. She laid out the freshly washed clothes on the wooden clothes rack that Gams and Rodice had made. The sight of her working so peacefully calmed me somehow. It was like everything inside the wooden fence was trapped in a bubble of peace, despite the monsters lurking in the nearby forest. But I’d seen Gams and Murus run into monsters daily—no matter how quiet it seemed, my villagers couldn’t let their guards down.

Just like in the real world, the villagers ate three meals a day. Once the laundry was finished, it was time for lunch. The women prepared a meal, and the four villagers in the cave ate together. Lyra had given Gams and Murus packed lunches in the morning, so they ate in the forest—Gams quickly climbed

a tree to check that the coast was clear before they rested. From up there, I was pretty sure he could see the cave. They never ventured so far that they couldn't run back in an emergency.

I really wanted some more people for my village. My villagers were so busy with their chores that there was no time to work on expanding. More than anything, I wanted someone who could fight. With Gams gone most of the day, there was no one left to protect the cave. But I'd decided that any newcomers could wait until we'd made it through the Day of Corruption. I needed to save my FP until the danger passed.

As the sun set, Gams and Murus returned to the cave. They'd successfully killed some game, and Gams set to work butchering the carcasses so the meat could be cooked for dinner. Since everyone was together, I decided to send the daily prophecy. It was something I picked up from a psychology blog now that the Day of Corruption was approaching.

They seemed impressed when they read it. If only they knew I'd just copied and pasted it from the Internet.

As usual, Carol and Chem had a minor quarrel, and then after dinner everyone went back to their rooms to relax before bed. They always ate their dinner long before it got dark, usually around an hour before my family had theirs.

"Yoshio! Dinner!" my mom called.

I decided to end my observation there. It didn't seem like anything interesting was going to happen before they slept.

Wonder what's for dinner tonight...

The meat my villagers ate looked so good, I was really hoping that Mom had cooked something they'd sent us. The moment I smelled that gamey smell as I was coming down the stairs, I broke into a grin.

Chapter 5:

My Shut-In Villagers and My First Steps Outside

THOUGH MY VILLAGERS were already asleep, I stared at the screen, not feeling the least bit tired. After watching them live through a whole day, they seemed more real to me than ever. Rodice and his family were all sleeping together in the same big bed. Gams and Chem shared a room, but she slept in a bed while he slept on a pile of dry leaves on the floor, kept warm by an animal pelt. Murus had his own room, where he was sleeping peacefully.

“They’re really no different from us,” I murmured.

I’d stopped trying to work out whether they were really the product of complex A.I. or not, since just thinking about it wasn’t going to give me any answers. For now, I needed to focus on developing the village—and making sure they kept sending me lots of delicious offerings.

“Ten days until the monster attack.”

There were plenty of things I could do to prepare. The first was to get more villagers to help defend against an attack. Right now, I could afford maybe one more with my FP. More fighters meant safer villagers and less pressure on Gams. The only issue was that I had no idea what kind of person this new warrior would be. With such complex characters, personality could be a problem, and adding a new person could cause conflict and strife before the Day of Corruption even arrived. I wasn’t sure I wanted to risk it.

There are already plenty of weapons, so we’re fine for that...but only Gams and Murus actually know how to use them. I could get them to build a stone wall outside the wooden fence...but with so few people, I doubt it would be ready in time.

Since their cave had formerly been a mine, there was bound to be good-quality stone. Again, my problem was the lack of people. I checked to see if there were any other useful miracles. One was relatively cheap: spawning a group of mercenaries who would help my villagers fight temporarily. Similarly,

there was another that would spawn a group of hunters who would stay at the village for three days. They'd probably help defend against the attack, too.

With the mercenaries, I'd again be worried about their personalities—and mercs in fiction weren't usually stand-up guys. I didn't want to summon anyone who might put my village in even more danger. In most games, I wouldn't need to worry about whether my characters got along or not. That was part of what made *The Village of Fate* so interesting. Though the problems the game posed were similar to other games, you couldn't tackle them the same way. You couldn't grind, or practice and learn foolproof strategies, either.

There was one other option: I could summon that golem I'd had my eye on. Since I could control it directly, I would be able to use it wherever it was needed most. I wouldn't need to worry about it going feral on my villagers either, and I was pretty sure it couldn't talk, so it wouldn't start any quarrels. But I didn't have even half the points I'd need to buy it.

I would've bought more FP without question, but I was out of savings. I had a couple hundred yen, but that was just a drop in the ocean compared to how much I needed.

I looked at my bookshelves, which were bare of manga and light novels. I was out of prizes to auction off, too. My only other possessions were my second computer and my weightlifting equipment. Nothing that would sell for much.

Maybe I could borrow some money from Mom and Dad...

I dismissed the idea immediately. I'd only just started mending my relationship with them, and I didn't want to ruin that now.

"Could you lend me some money for an online game?"

Yeah, if I asked them that, they'd tell me to pack my bags on the spot.

Maybe I should ask Sayu—

I didn't even bother to finish that thought.

What if I could sell some of my villagers' offerings... People would probably be too suspicious to buy the fruit, but maybe someone would want the logs. I quickly searched for how to sell timber online, and it didn't seem like I needed a

license, at least. Maybe I could use them to build something and then sell that...

It was a great idea in theory, but I didn't even know how to make planks, let alone do woodworking projects. Even if I did, there was no guarantee I'd sell it and get paid within my ten-day limit. I sighed. I was out of options, except for quitting the game—but the guilt would consume me. I'd gotten more emotional lately, to the point where even a sentimental anime episode could get me choked up. The thought of abandoning my little village was too much for me.

Then I realized there *was* another option—a way to get money I'd been trying to ignore this whole time. I turned to my second PC and opened a job listing site. I could pick up a part-time job for a while and make some money that way. Simple, right? For most people, at least...but I'd never worked a day in my life. I hadn't had a part-time job as a student. I never even had to study at home. I did interview for a couple of part-time jobs when I was in college, but I messed up because of nerves and never got any offers.

Had it really been nerves? Or, deep down, had I felt like most of that work was beneath me? I'd had the same attitude when I started applying for real jobs. I only applied to positions asking for students from top-ranking schools, with top pay. And we all saw how that worked out for me.

Again and again, I'd gone for jobs that were looking for the best of the best, and again and again, I messed up the interviews. Over the past ten years, the thought of looking for work crossed my mind several times, even just something part-time. But I was always too afraid that people would think I was pathetic, working some crappy part-time job at my age.

Really, though, wasn't it more pathetic that I'd never achieved anything on my own? My parents had applied for every single school I ever attended, including my college. Even some of my interviews after graduation had been through connections from my dad. I'd been so afraid that my efforts would end up wasted that I ended up wasting ten years of my life. I'd only recently realized how messed up that way of thinking really was. All these years, I'd been lying to myself, pretending it was the shock of all those failed interviews that caused my isolation. But I was unemployed and in my thirties. I didn't deserve the sense of entitlement I felt. I'd been so *stupid*. I'd always told myself I could try again tomorrow, but when tomorrow became today, I never acted. Even when my

mom encouraged me, when my dad got mad at me, when Sayuki laughed at me, I'd stayed idle. But this game was my chance to finally make a difference—maybe my last chance. If I couldn't bring myself to work for my villagers, this might be my life until I died.

"I promised myself I was going to change! I *want* to change!"

So now, it was time to actually do it. With a trembling hand, I began to scroll through short-term job listings. There were plenty of available positions, if I wasn't choosy. I clicked through them to see if I was qualified for any. What I really wanted was something I could start right away and finish at the end of the month, so I could afford to keep my villagers safe during that final day.

There wasn't much in the way of admin work, and a lot of the jobs that looked tempting wanted more experience than I could offer. Even the short-term posts at convenience stores wanted six months experience. Those probably wouldn't work out anyway—the only people I ever talked to were my family, and I could barely hold a conversation with them, so I didn't exactly feel qualified for customer-facing work. There were also a few construction jobs advertising daily work, but I didn't know if I could do that, either. Wasn't construction supposed to be super tough and stressful?

I thought about giving up right then...but I didn't have much time left. I just needed to pick something to last me until the end of the month. I tried to think whether there might be anything in our neighborhood, but I didn't come up with much. It was too rural, and I'd need a moped or a car to commute. I had a license for neither. My lack of effort over the past ten years was catching up to me in lots of ways. Maybe one of the free local magazines would have job listings—I'd just have to find out. I got dressed and made my way downstairs.

"Going out again?" Mom asked, surprised.

"Yeah. I'll be back later."

Leaving the house, I got onto my bike.

"Just pedal," I muttered under my breath. "Don't think. Don't worry. Just pedal."

I couldn't stop. If I stopped, my brain would come up with a million excuses. I

ignored the stares of the neighbors around me. Let them talk about me if they wanted. I didn't care.

I picked up some free local magazines at the bookstore and the convenience store. I also bought some blank resume forms—I knew I had some at home from years ago, but who knows where I'd put them. I had a long history of buying new forms and never using them. When I arrived home, I bumped into Mom, who was just going out shopping. I noticed her eyes widening as she caught sight of the magazines in my hand, but I quickly darted past her and up the stairs.

The first thing I did was circle all the jobs that matched my qualifications. Once I finished that, it was back to the Internet. This time, I wanted to find out what sorts of jobs were suitable for people with poor social skills.

"Yoshio! Dinner!"

Mom's call made me jump. I didn't realize it was already so late. I must have been really focused. I still needed to write up a resume for the jobs I was interested in. I could do that after dinner.

When I came downstairs, I found all three other members of my family at the table. My sister was in a suit; she must have just come back from work.

"You're home," I said.

"Wish I wasn't?" Her reply was as scathing as always.

I could still remember when she was little and told me she would marry me when she was older. Those days were *long* gone.

"Course not. Welcome back."

Sayuki paused. "Thanks."

My sister looked surprised that I was acting like a normal human being for once. I couldn't blame her. I'd usually just mumble something bitter or run away and hide in my room. I was always too ashamed to have a normal conversation with her.

I took my seat. Sayuki left briefly to change out of her suit before coming back

to the table. She kept throwing glances my way, probably wondering why I'd decided to eat with the family for the first time in so long.

"Are we celebrating something, Mom?" Sayuki asked. "Dinner seems fancier than usual."

I hadn't noticed until Sayuki pointed it out. Not only were there more dishes than usual, they were all complex and time-consuming. After studying cooking, I was actually able to make a judgment like that.

Mom smiled. "It's because Yoshio's started looking for a job!"

I choked on my tea.

"Oh?" Dad raised a single eyebrow.

"Huh. About time..." Sayuki was looking at me, but there was no malice in her eyes. I could feel my insides squirming under their gazes.

"I'm only looking for something short-term at first. I need the money."

"It doesn't matter why. It's a good thing to do."

I froze. Did my dad really say that? I was expecting him to be angry that I wasn't going for a full-time job.

"You've seemed different lately, Oniichan," said Sayuki. "Do you have a girlfriend or something?"

"Don't be silly. He couldn't get a girlfriend."

I brushed off Mom's remark—Sayuki had called me *Oniichan*. I couldn't remember the last time she addressed me as anything other than "Oi" or "Get out of my way." As I stared at her in surprise, she averted her gaze. Maybe it was just a slip of the tongue.

"Does this have something to do with the village that keeps sending us gifts?" Though Dad usually kept his thoughts to himself, he could be very perceptive.

"Kinda, yeah. I know I'm helping them out, but I still feel bad that they're sending me all this stuff. I wanna do something more for them than just giving advice."

That wasn't exactly a lie...

“What’s this about a village?” Sayuki asked, leaning forward over the table. “I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“Don’t do that while we’re eating—and eat your food while it’s hot. Let me tell you all about it,” said Mom, giving Sayuki a light, playful smack on the head.

Sayuki frowned but did as she was told. Mom seemed so happy that I decided to leave the explanation to her.

Chapter 6:

The Village in Danger and My High-Strung Nerves

DAD LIKED TO SIT in the garden after dinner. One night, I joined him, gazing up at the night sky.

“So, did you find a job yet?”

“Not yet. There are three I wanna go for, so I’ll phone them tomorrow.”

“All short-term?”

“Yeah. The village has something they need at the end of the month, so I was thinking of starting work as soon as possible to finish by then.”

“As soon as possible...” my dad murmured. “You used to always say you’d do things *tomorrow* and then get angry.”

“I really mean it. I’m serious about working this time.”

“What sort of jobs are you looking for?” Dad asked.

“Well, I wanna push myself, but I dunno if I could deal with something customer-facing. It would probably make the place look bad if I worked there. So I was thinking of manual labor or something. I-I’m not saying it’s easy work, but I kinda feel like that’s a way I could actually be useful.”

“Listen, if you’re serious, I can ask an acquaintance of mine.”

I hesitated. I was grateful for his offer, but I worried if I let myself rely on someone else again, it would just turn into more excuses.

“Yoshio. It doesn’t matter how old you get. I’ll always be your father. You don’t need to be ashamed about taking my help, and it wouldn’t mean you didn’t achieve this for yourself. If you have a goal, then it’s your family’s responsibility to help you achieve it. Part of being an adult is recognizing that.” Dad looked me right in the eye.

I got the impression that he *wanted* to help. For some reason, I was reminded of Rodice always keeping an eye on Carol. She was an independent kid, but

Rodice was always watching out for her and seemed to like it when she relied on him. Maybe he and my dad weren't so different.

"In that case...yes, please," I said. I think that was the first time in ten years I'd asked my dad for help.

"Give me a moment." Dad pulled out a cell phone that looked like it came from last century. Stepping into the living room, he made a call.

I couldn't make any excuses now. There was no way I'd let Dad down—not again. Still, my heart was pounding, and sweat poured down my back. Just the thought of working was sending me into a panic.

"Yoshio. Got any clothes that are easy to move in?" Dad asked, poking his head back outside.

"Uh, yeah—I've got a jersey."

"All right. Get changed and come downstairs."

It looked like he managed to nab me an interview.

"I haven't made up my resume yet..."

"It doesn't matter. I know the guy, so you can sort that out later."

So it really was an interview. Maybe I was supposed to do some physical test for it, which is why I had to change.

I raced to the bathroom to shave. I couldn't go to an interview with my face in its current state. As soon as I was done, I went back to my bedroom and dug out a jersey.

My hands were shaking. I'd spent the whole day looking for work. I should be happy I had an interview! I still remembered bursting into tears as I watched Gams and Chem together. Was that just a moment of weakness? When I said I wanted to change, did I really mean it?

I glanced at my computer screen. Chem and Gams were inspecting the fence for damage. Carol was napping while her mom checked the food supply, and Rodice was doing some repairs.

My villagers worked so hard, while their God was too much of a coward to go

to work. I couldn't let them down.

Thank you all...

Watching my villagers gave me the courage I needed. I shook my head to clear my nerves.

"I'll see you later."

Changed, I shut the bedroom door behind me.

Dad was waiting for me by the front door.

"What kind of job is it?" I asked.

"It's a cleaning company. They need more people to help clean supermarkets overnight. Their part-timer quit recently, so they were more than happy to take you."

I thought back to the company that cleaned my college. I remembered the high-tech machines they had, like the one with the spinning brushes and the giant vacuum cleaner.

We arrived at a small supermarket. It was after hours, but all its lights were on.

This was the point of no return. The moment I got out of this car, there'd be no turning back. But there was still time to ask Dad to take me home, to tell him I didn't want to do this after all.

This was my chance to change—for my villagers, and for me.

As Dad and I walked to the supermarket, I could hear all sorts of mechanical noises coming from inside. A large man came out to greet us.

"Thanks so much for coming! You look pretty strong—that's great!" He thumped my shoulder. The sheer power in his hand made me wonder why this man wasn't out in the mountains hunting wolverines.

"I-I'll do my best."

"Take good care of him," said Dad, turning around to leave.

A little voice in my head told me to go with him. But I couldn't. Dad had gone to the trouble of setting this up for me. I couldn't disappoint him now.

"Don't be so nervous! Just do whatever I tell you. I'm the guy who runs this company, by the way. If there's anything you can't do, or if you have any questions, just ask me or one of the two over there. Nobody has a clue when they're first starting out, and I'd rather you ask!" He called to the other cleaners, "Hey, guys! We got a new kid working with us today. Be nice to him, okay?"

He seemed like a genuinely kind person, but I could hardly believe that someone like this ran his own company.

I probably shouldn't judge him so harshly on my first day.

I was only working so I could pour money into an online game, which was a pretty pathetic reason. I shouldn't be judging *anybody*.

The two he'd gestured to, a man and a woman, came over and greeted me.

"Hi there. You're only working here till the end of the month, right? It's nice to meet ya!"

"You're pretty tall! You can clean the fluorescents."

They both looked to be around my age, or perhaps a little older, which was honestly a bit of a relief. It'd be hard to have younger people in charge of me. The age difference might make them treat me differently. These two seemed nice and pretty clearly had better social skills than me. Even if they were both in uniform at the moment, I got the impression they dressed better than me, too. But this was no time for acting entitled or high-and-mighty. I needed to get on with it and work hard—just like my villagers.

I took a deep breath and looked at the pair in front of me.

"I'll do my best," I promised with a bow.

"So, you can come again tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah."

“Great! It’s another night shift, so you’ll be working the same hours as today... I guess that was yesterday now, technically. Anyway, I’ll pick you up at eight. Nice work today.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

“See ya!”

The boss dropped me off in front of my house. I’d made it through the night. Whenever the stress started to feel overwhelming, I pictured my villagers. The boss and my coworkers were really nice people, which helped put me at ease. And with manual labor, my lack of experience wasn’t as big a problem as I thought it’d be. It was the kind of work anyone could pick up pretty easily—and if I’d actually done job research and kept an open mind, I would’ve realized that sooner.

After bowing at my boss’s car while he drove away, I let myself in quietly. It was three in the morning, and everyone was asleep.

Cleaning a supermarket was a very physical job—even if it was easy to learn, it was hard, demanding work, and I was drenched in sweat. I wanted to peel the jersey off my sticky back and get into the bath as soon as possible. “I guess cleaning is a tougher job than I thought.”

I’d spent the whole night pushing around a large vacuum-type machine that sucked up gravel and dirty water, and now my arms and thighs were aching. I also washed down the cleaning equipment once we were done. I was pretty sure the boss gave me the easiest jobs since I was new. They probably could’ve done everything I did a hundred times faster and better, but I still did my part. It must have been years since I last moved so much. It felt good, though. I’d worked, and I was proud to be able to say that.

I switched on the living room light. There was something on the dining table. It was a rice ball, some sausages, and a small omelet. There was also a note.

“Well done at work. Thought you might be hungry, so I made you some food,” I read aloud.

Though Mom studied calligraphy and her handwriting was usually perfect, this time it was a little messy, as though she wrote the note in a hurry. The

omelet and rice ball weren't as neat as I was used to from her, either. She was probably sleepy when she made them.

I sat down and unwrapped my meal. It was still a little warm. I took a bite of the rice ball first.

"I didn't know food could taste this good..."

After finishing my meal, I headed to the bath. I only realized when I was buck naked that it was still warm in there. It was so cold outside, I was used to the bathroom being freezing at this time of night. I took the cover off the bath to find it still filled with water at just the right temperature...

"It's too clean to be used..."

Mom must have cleaned it out and filled it up for me.

"Thanks," I said, since I couldn't say it to her face.

Chapter 7:

A Suspicious Man and My Aching Muscles

BY THE TIME I woke up, it was already midday. I hadn't woken up so late in a long time—and I'd slept like a log, totally dreamlessly. When I stretched, my arms and thighs throbbed painfully in protest.

My whole body ached, but my thighs were especially bad. When I worked out, I often skipped leg day, and I was paying the price now. I tried to stand up but collapsed instantly like a baby deer. Giving up, I instead began to crawl awkwardly. Somehow, I made it to my computer to check on my villagers.

“Wonder if anything happened while I was away...”

I scrolled through the backlog. At first everything seemed normal, but then I found something unusual. Someone had been speaking in the early hours of the morning when nobody else was awake.

“I've seen nothing suspicious so far. I'm sure they're just refugees. Yes. I'll take a look and then return.”

It sounded like a conversation, not something someone would mutter to themselves. I wish I could have seen what happened, but all I had was the plain backlog text.

“I am sure the Day of Corruption will wipe them all out without our help, just like the last bunch of humans and those repulsive dwarves who settled here.”

I hadn't known there were dwarves in this world, but they were a fantasy staple...

“I'm slightly worried about the blessings they receive from the God of Fate. If we meddle, we may invoke His wrath. That's why I believe we ought to stick to observing... Yes. I understand. Those who encroach on our holy ground must face the judgment of the God of Plants.”

It had to be Murus. He was the only person who knew the forest and was close enough to my villagers to watch them. So he wasn't the helpful physician

he appeared to be. From the sound of it, he belonged to a group that already lived nearby and was suspicious of my villagers. Was this why I couldn't see his bio like the other characters? After spending so long getting to know him, his betrayal kind of hurt.

"I'm glad they have me, at least."

It sounded like he wasn't planning to act against my village, thankfully. If it weren't for me, the God of Fate, maybe Murus wouldn't be so scared to do something to them. What *did* worry me was that I had been relying on him to help protect my villagers on the Day of Corruption. If I couldn't count on him, then Gams was the only fighting-fit villager.

I wanted to work on a solution right away, but I'd woken up hungry. It'd be better to eat something first so my brain could work at full capacity.

When I went downstairs, I found Mom doing the dishes.

"Oh, you're up! I'll warm up some lunch for you."

"Don't worry. I'll do it myself."

Lunch was last night's leftover dinner and soup. Mom finished up the dishes and sat across from me as I ate.

"How was work?"

"Everyone's really nice. I've gotta work tonight, too. Same time."

"Oh, really? That's nice." Mom smiled at me.

It had been years since she'd seemed so happy. Still, it made me feel uneasy that she was praising me for something most people did on a daily basis and without a second thought.

"How was the food I left you?" she asked.

"Oh, um...it was great. Er... Um... Thanks," I managed to say.

Not only did my villagers help each other, they were properly grateful—and that kept their relationships working smoothly. I wanted to follow their example.

“You’re welcome. All these changes are really nice, Yoshio.”

“Yeah...” I got to my feet and rushed back to my room, unable to take the embarrassment anymore.

I was going to go back to bed and rest my muscles before work, but I sat back at my computer without thinking.

“Huh. Guess I’m on autopilot.”

Anyway, it was time to take things seriously with my village. I couldn’t just sit by and watch them like I usually did. I had to keep an eye on Murus. I considered letting him know I was on to him in the daily prophecy, but I’d need to be careful to say something that only he would understand, so as not to alarm my villagers. I briefly thought about telling them directly that Murus was not on their side, but I decided against it. They had enough to worry about. Besides, I didn’t want him running away either. He was still valuable when it came to keeping my people safe and fed.

I finally finished writing my prophecy. My villagers were all together, having just finished lunch, so there was no better time to send it.

Chem quickly swallowed her last mouthful of food. “Look, everyone! The daily prophecy is here!”

Whoops. I hadn’t realized she was still eating.

“I know you are all worried about the Day of Corruption, but please, stay strong. I still have enough power to perform some miracles. Do not forget that you are under my protection. Should there be anyone who dares harm you, they shall incur my wrath. Do not forget this.”

Chem read out my message. As she did so, I kept an eye on Murus, and I didn’t miss the change in his expression—his eyes darted back and forth in panic. He was scared! He wouldn’t try anything now.

“We’ll be fine,” said Gams. “The Lord is watching over us. But that doesn’t

mean we can let up! The Lord doesn't reward the lazy! We still have to do our best."

C'mon, Gams, that hit a little too close to home...

I already knew I didn't deserve to be God of anything, except maybe loafing around.

Anyway, now that I'd taken care of the Murus situation, it was time to focus on the survival plan for the Day of Corruption. First of all, I had to keep working so I could afford more Fate Points. I was paid by the hour, so I wasn't sure how much I could expect to earn, but I estimated I'd bring home about 30,000 yen.

My eyes then fell upon a parcel in the corner of my room. It had arrived while I was sleeping. I opened it up to find a small, very round pebble.

"I bet you spent ages pickin' this out for me, huh, Carol?" I knew it was just a rock, but I couldn't help smiling as I held it in my palm.

My villagers assumed they could only send me one offering a day, but the truth was they could send up to two. Carol was using up one of those "slots" by copying the adults and putting her own offering on the altar. Her gifts were usually pebbles she liked the shape of or small, white flowers. Sometimes I'd even be treated to a clump of dirt. Lately, she'd started sending me tiny wood carvings, a skill she'd picked up from watching Chem and Gams make my statue. I thought they were supposed to be dolls, but it wasn't quite clear. They were getting better and better, and I always looked forward to seeing what kind of creation she'd send me next. That didn't stop me from worrying every time she picked up the carving knife, though.

I put the pebble on my shelf where I used to keep my manga and light novels. Her wooden crafts were there, too. Anyone else would probably think I was crazy for keeping this stuff, but to me and Carol they were rare treasures.

I knew they probably weren't real gifts. Even if a kid actually made them, it was probably one of the developer's children. But I wanted to believe they were real, pathetic as that might be.

"I know she's not real..."

With my new pebble on the shelf, I stretched out my limbs and let out a

yawn. Boy, was I sore.

“Time for a nap, I think. I just hope my limbs feel better when I wake up.”

Even just getting up from my chair sent a stabbing pain through my muscles. I wasn't as nervous about working as I'd been last night, probably because I knew what to expect. Up until now, the very idea of work had made me feel nauseated. Yet here I was, almost looking forward to it. I could help someone out and earn money by doing it. But most of all, I could make Mom smile.

That night, I was working with the same two coworkers as the day before. When we were all on break, our boss told us about how he used to work for a huge cleaning company, but they paid badly and treated their employees like crap. So, ten years ago, he took everything he'd learned and set up his own company. When things got busy, he'd ask other small cleaning companies to lend some of their employees or hire temporary workers like me.

“And you're already getting pretty good at this!” said my brawny boss.

I was just using the vacuum to suck up dirty water, but I appreciated the praise.

“R-right,” I said.

“No need to be so nervous! I know it's only your second day, but you're doing fine...”

“Thanks!” I plastered a smile on my face, hoping he wouldn't think I was laughing at him.

With my limited social skills, I wasn't quite sure how to act. I tried to think back to how I'd been in college, but those memories had faded over the past ten years. It had been a long time since I'd interacted with people outside my family.

“These days, my employees are a really nice bunch. And even if they look like a bunch of ne'er-do-wells, they're all excellent workers.”

I followed the boss's gaze to see one of my new coworkers, hard at work. He'd dyed his hair light brown, and he didn't look like the kind of guy who'd

take work seriously. But when I watched him work, I could see how efficiently he tackled the task at hand.

“The best thing you can do is take work seriously. Do that, and no one can ask any more of you.”

“Thank you!” His words really got through to me, and my reply came out a little louder than I meant it to.

“Well, I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself!”

“Hey, Boss! Quit killin’ time with the new guy and come help us out! And Yoshio-kun, don’t get too enthusiastic! You don’t wanna burn out!”

“If you’re gonna slack off, Boss, we’re gonna give ourselves a raise and take it outta your pay!”

“S-s-sorry guys... Hey, wait! You’re not the accountant! And I’m your boss!” The boss rushed over in a comedic show of rage.

The relaxed atmosphere made it easy for me to loosen up. I had nothing to compare it to, but I sure knew it was fun to be here. I knew it wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows, but it felt like a job I could give my all to, no matter what happened. “I gotta do this...for them.”

There was less than a week to go until the Day of Corruption.

Chapter 8:

My Dad's Troubles and My Ignorance

“GOODBYE.” I bowed to my coworkers as I got out of the car in front of my house.

Work had started in the afternoon today, so even though it was past dinnertime and dark out, I was home much earlier than usual. Apparently, work for the next three days would be the same.

“Guess I’m eatin’ alone tonight.”

I couldn’t help feeling a little down. On my late-night shifts, I could eat with everyone before heading off to work. It was funny; until recently, I’d much preferred eating alone. I couldn’t help but smile wryly at the change in my attitude.

When I walked inside, Dad was in the living room and Mom was in the kitchen.

“I’m home.”

“Welcome back. You should’ve told me what time you were getting home! Then we could’ve all eaten together!”

“I don’t mind. Plus, I didn’t know what time I’d be back. It all depends on when we’re done.”

“Oh, I see. Anyway, you must be hungry! Let me warm something up for you!” Switching on the stove, Mom began to whistle happily.

She seemed even more cheerful than usual. I wanted to ask Dad if something had happened, but I was still a little nervous talking to him. He was so reserved and blunt that even in my college days, I found him hard to talk to. But things were different now...right?

He was sitting on the couch, reading a newspaper. All I had to do was ask, “How come Mom’s in such a good mood?”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. It would probably take a while before I could just talk to him without getting worked up about it. Still, I had to be brave. I at least owed him a thank you for getting me my job.

“Dad—”

“Food’s ready!”

Mom’s voice drowned mine out completely.

Guess I’ll eat first...

As I ate, Mom sat across from me with a wide smile on her face. I knew that look. She wanted me to ask what was up. It was almost unbearable to sit in front of her like that and *not* ask. If I left it, she would keep sitting there in silence, just smiling and smiling. I almost decided to ignore her and keep eating, but in the end, I couldn’t take it. I put my chopsticks down.

“Did something happen, Mom?”

“Would you really like to know?” She giggled like a schoolgirl.

Quit actin’ like you don’t wanna tell me...

Usually when she got like this, it was because she’d done something she was proud of—and to be perfectly honest, it was always something I didn’t really care about. But I was in too deep to walk away now—she’d just get mad at me.

“Guess what your dad did today!”

“Dear, that show you like is starting!” Dad called from the living room.

“Oh! I’ll be right there!”

Thanks, Dad. You saved me.

To be honest, I was even more curious now. Dad must’ve stopped her on purpose, right? So it was something he didn’t want me to know. Maybe it was something mushy about how great their relationship was going... In which case, I was seriously glad my dad headed her off. Well, I wasn’t going to ask her now, so I put my dishes in the sink and headed for the bathroom to take a bath.

“Damn...now I’m *really* curious.”

Dad never got flustered over anything. Nothing that I could remember, at

least...

Once I was out of the bath, I looked in on my parents, but they were still sitting amicably side by side. I decided to leave them alone. I was exhausted, anyway. One of my coworkers was off today, so we'd had to pick up the slack. I knew I'd fall asleep the second I got into bed, but before that, I wanted to check on my village.

It was late. Carol was already asleep. Chem and Gams were settling down in their room too, Gams taking care of his sword and Chem reciting her prayers. Murus was in his room, lying on the bed with his eyes open. Ever since I let him know I was on to him, I'd been expecting him to just leave, but for the moment he was still here.

"Maybe he's making sure my villagers stay here till the Day of Corruption."

I decided to keep an eye on him. Even if he was wary of me, that didn't guarantee he wouldn't try anything. He didn't know the extent of my powers.

Rodice and Lyra were making eyes at each other in a different room from where Carol was sleeping. It was probably best that I didn't pay too much attention to them right now. I was glad that they felt safe and relaxed enough to spend some alone time together.

To be honest, the graphics were so realistic, I'd feel like a peeping tom if I ever happened to see anything. There were no baths or toilets, so I caught glimpses of them washing themselves with cloths or making use of the great outdoors from time to time. I knew it was a game and I didn't need to feel awkward about that kind of thing, but I was supposed to be the God of Fate, not the God of Perverts. And, well, after all these weeks of observation, I just couldn't think of them as just game characters anymore. I found myself respecting their privacy as much as I would my own family's.

"I'll go to bed soon..." I promised myself, rubbing my eyes and slapping at my cheeks to keep myself awake. I needed to get to bed, but I wanted to check the backlog before switching off for the night.

"Aren't you tired, Gams? Why don't you take a break?"

“Gams! Gams! Let’s take a nap together outside! The sun’s nice and warm!”

“Carol, I’m trying to speak to *my* brother. Please be quiet.”

“But he wants to have a nap with me! Right, Gams?!”

“No, he really doesn’t. If he wants to nap...he’ll do it with me.”

There was no reply from the man in question.

“Gams?! Where are you going?”

“Wait! What about our nap?!”

I could picture the scene clearly in my mind—Chem and Carol arguing over Gams right in front of him.

Nothing new there.

I kept scrolling and found a conversation between Gams and Murus.

“The monsters are getting restless.”

“I’ve noticed, too. We should stay on our guard.”

“This tends to happen whenever the Day of Corruption approaches. Perhaps it would be better for the others to stay in the cave from now until the day has passed?”

“Good thinking. I’ll tell ’em.”

It sounded like they were on patrol. Before, I would’ve been relieved, but right now I was really worried that Murus might try something. I wanted to warn Gams and the others, but I was so sleepy right now that I couldn’t make a proper judgment. I scrolled further to find a conversation between Lyra and Rodice.

“It looks like Carol’s asleep...”

“I see... Is that why you’re so close all of a sudden?”

“Well... We haven’t had time for just *us* in a while...”

That was enough for today. I didn’t want to give myself nightmares! In any case, nothing big happened while I was gone. I let out a yawn.

“Man, I haven’t been this tired in ages.”

Just then, a strange symbol in the top-left corner of the screen caught my eye.

“It says...‘reality’?”

This was definitely a first. It reminded me of that time when the word “dream” appeared above Gams’s head. Maybe something would happen if I clicked on this, too.

All right, I’ll click it quick, and then I’ll go to bed.

Moving the mouse to the top-left corner of the screen, I clicked on “reality.”

Just like before, the screen turned black before showing me a new scene. I saw a cross-section of a regular house from above with the roof invisible. The weird thing was, it looked like a totally modern house. It had a toilet, a bath, a living room, a porch, and a kitchen.

“This looks kinda familiar. *Really* familiar.”

It was my family’s house. It took me a second to work it out, as I’d never seen it from above, but I’d been living here for thirty years, so it didn’t take me long to realize what I was looking at. I knew this house like the back of my hand. How many nights had I spent awake, keeping guard over this place? Okay, maybe putting it like that was a bit of a stretch.

The overhead view showed one person in the bathroom and two in the living room. Out of curiosity, I moved the cursor over the bathroom, and text appeared.

“I’m so tired...and, ugh, why’s my skin been so dry lately?! Hmm...I wish my chest would grow a little more—I’ve been doing all those exercises...”

I was zoomed out so far I couldn’t see much, but it looked like she was looking down at her chest and rubbing at it. If this was real and she knew I saw her, I’d be *dead*.

Good thing this is just a dream, right? I still looked away, just in case.

I turned my attention to the other room. When I looked closer, I saw Mom and Dad sitting on the couch where I left them when I went up to my room—they hadn’t moved, even though the TV was off now.

Okay, this is definitely a dream.

I must have been thinking about my mom's secret before I fell asleep—that was why I was dreaming about her now. And since it was a dream, listening in on their conversation was no big deal. I hovered my cursor over them.

"Please don't mention things like that in front of our son."

"But I'm so happy! This is the first time in ten years you remembered our anniversary, and you even bought me a present! I just want to share it with the world!"

I hadn't known today was their anniversary. But nice as it was to see them getting along, as their son I couldn't help feeling embarrassed about snooping on even an *imaginary* private moment.

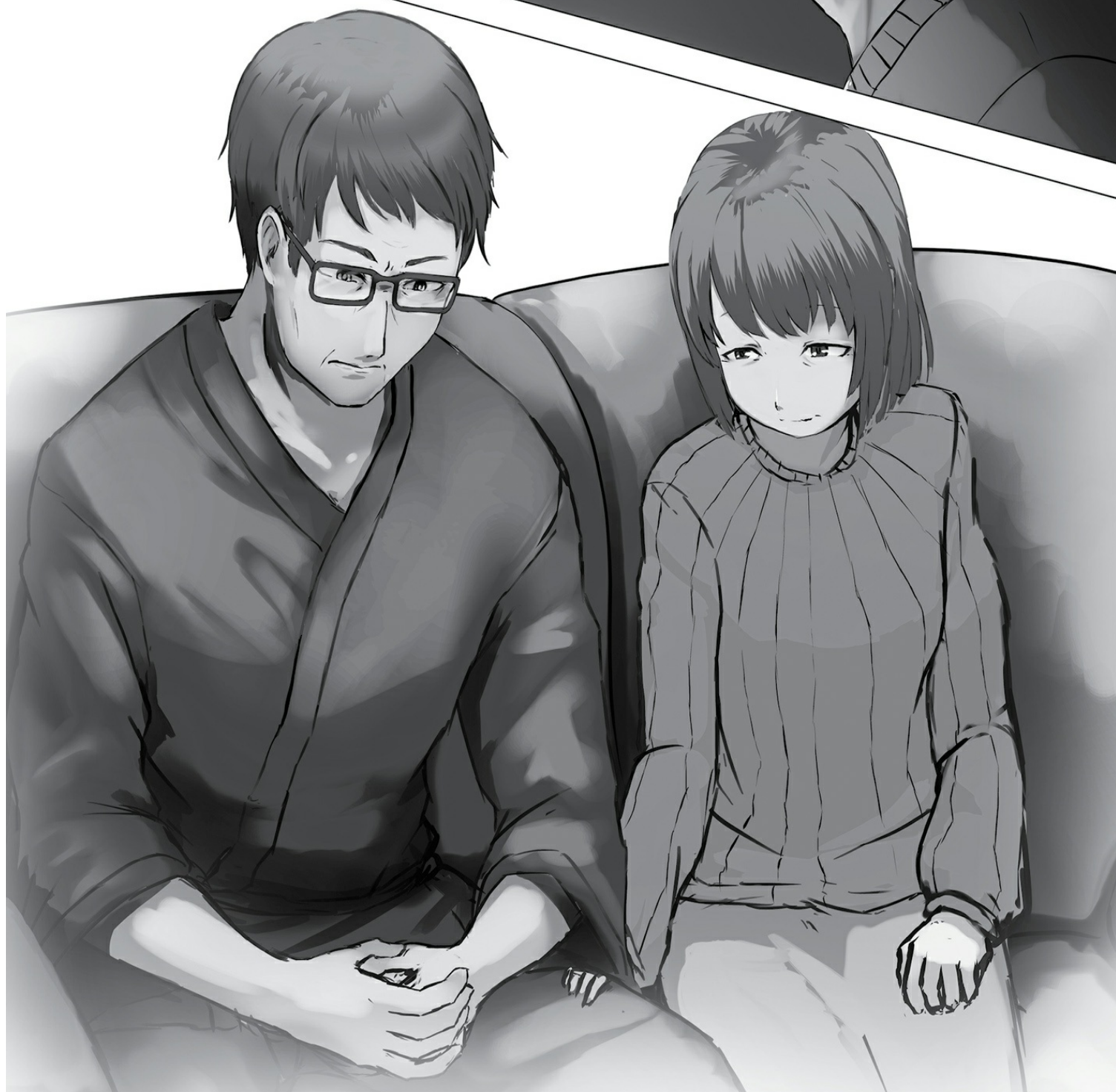
"I'm just glad it made you happy...and I'm sorry I didn't do this sooner. I've just been so...so *worried* these past ten years."

"I know. It's always been Yoshio, right?"

"Yes."

His confession pierced my heart. The truth was, my father hadn't always been so withdrawn. He'd always been quiet, but he used to have so much life under that calm exterior. Once, he pulled a muscle when he overdid it in the father-son relay race. Another time, while carrying me on his shoulders, he'd tripped, injuring himself to stop me from falling off. Whenever I was stuck on my homework, he'd explain it to me. When Mom got mad at me, he'd secretly get me an ice cream and sit with me until I stopped crying.

I always thought of my dad as strict and distant...or maybe I'd just convinced myself that was how he was. I buried all these memories away so that I didn't have to face the truth that it was my fault things were so tense in the family. But now, they were rushing back. I'd only let myself remember the things that made my NEET lifestyle feel like the only option. This dream was showing me the truth that I blinded myself to while awake.



“Yoshio’s been so much happier since he got that job.”

“I’m glad. I’ve wanted to apologize to him for a long time.”

My eyes widened. I read the text again. He wanted to apologize to me? What for? *I* was the one who needed to say sorry, and I had a lot to be sorry for. He had nothing to apologize about.

“You mean about that fight you had?”

“Yes. I’ll never forget what I said to him.”

I remembered that fight too, but I didn’t remember Dad saying anything he should be regretting. Everything he’d said was true.

“I yelled at him and said he didn’t work hard enough. That anyone could find a job if they just put their mind to it.”

I remembered that. It did shock me at the time, because I thought I *was* trying. *Mom* thought I was trying—she always seemed surprised when we fought, too. But now I realized that I wasn’t trying, not really, and my dad had seen through me.

“Maybe it was out of line... You used to slack off in college, too,” my mom said.

“I wouldn’t call it slacking off.”

“Maybe not, but you did go to a lot of parties.”

Dad stayed silent.

By now, I was sure this was a dream. There was *no way* my dad was some kind of wild college slacker.

“I guess I did. But when I was his age, there was the bubble, and it was almost impossible *not* to find work—even if you weren’t looking. If I’d grown up in this economy, maybe I would’ve had even more trouble than he does.”

The bubble. When the Japanese economy was booming, and the future looked bright. I’d seen shows about it on TV, but to everyone born after it, it was almost unimaginable.

“Yoshio was a better student than I ever was, and when it came to looking for

a job, he tried his best. I had no right to say what I did to him.”

I couldn’t see my parents’ faces since it was a bird’s eye view. But I did see my dad trembling and slamming his fist down on the table, as though he was crying.

“When we became parents, I told myself it was time to grow up. I had to get serious and speak like an adult. But instead, I got a big head and started lecturing Yoshio when I was no better than him at his age. I’m the worst...”

Dad...

I’d never seen him so vulnerable before.

“My own mom was always going on about how I should take my studies seriously. I hated it. That’s why I always tried not to nag Sayuki and Yoshio about studying. But I guess, in the end, I ended up just like my mother.”

No, Dad.

Even if all this stuff about his past was true, I still looked up to him. To me, he was a man who always did his best in everything, and I desperately wanted to be like him.

“You were a wonderful man then, and you’re a wonderful man now. But I do think you could stand to relax a little. We might be parents of grown-up children, but we’re still the same people we used to be. Our family is four adults now, and even if we have them beat in age and experience, that doesn’t mean we haven’t made our own mistakes.”

“You know, when I was a kid, I always thought grown-ups knew everything.”

“Me, too. I think both of us still have a lot of growing to do, as well. Yoshio is working so hard to change. Maybe we should follow his example.”

My parents looked at each other and smiled.

It made me smile too, hearing that my parents had once felt the same way I did about adults. To me, they were already perfect. But even they had their problems.

My heart felt a little lighter. They weren’t so different from me, after all.

“I knew it.”

I woke up to find my face pressed into the keyboard and bright sunlight streaming in through the curtains. When I touched my cheek, I could feel the imprint of the keys. I checked the computer screen in front of me and, sure enough, all I saw was *The Village of Fate*. There were no weird buttons labeled “reality.”

I knew it. But even if my dream hadn’t been real, it made me happy. Maybe I could be more open with my parents from now on.

Interlude:

The Ravaged Village and the Refugees

THE MORNING SUN was streaming into her room when the little girl woke up. She stretched comfortably and looked around. The bed was far too big for just her, and there were three pillows on it. Next to it sat the picture book her parents had read to her last night. Its title was *The Princess and Prince Charming*. The girl hurried to get dressed, knowing her parents would already be up. She took a moment to check that she looked presentable in front of her mother's vanity before jumping through the door to the living room.

"Good morning, Mommy! Daddy!"

"Good morning, Carol."

"Sleeping late, Princess Carol? Why don't you go and wash your face?"

"Of course, Mother!" Carol curtsied like the princess from her book and then broke down into giggles.

Carol stepped outside to visit the well. There was a full pail of water next to it. She scooped some up to wash her face.

"That's better! Gotta fix my bedhead, too." She used a little more water to slick down her cowlicks and then dried her hands on her clothes when she realized she forgot a hand cloth.

"Good morning, Carol!"

Carol turned to see a girl on the other side of the fence.

"Hi...*Chem*. Where's Gams?"

"Well, *that* was quite the pause. Anyway, Gams is keeping watch at the gate today."

"Well, if he isn't here, I don't wanna talk to you!" Carol spun around to go back inside.

"Hey, wait—" The rest of Chem's words were cut off by the slamming door.

"Carol, was that Chem just now?" her mother asked.

“Dunno!” Carol replied, stuffing her cheeks full of bread.

Her parents exchanged an amused glance before digging into their own breakfast.

“Thanks for the food! I’m gonna go outside!”

“Wait, Carol! Where are you going?”

“I’m gonna go see Gams!”

“You can’t today! It’s—” her mother called, but Carol had already put her washing up in the sink and raced away.

She ran down the dirt path as fast as she could.

“Oh, good morning, Carol! I see you’re as peppy as always!”

“Hi! It’s so nice and sunny, isn’t it?” Carol waved at the elderly woman as she rushed past.

“Hey, Carol! I’ve got some nice fruit in today! Come and have some!” the woman’s husband called.

“Sorry! I already had breakfast!”

“Are Rodice and Lyra at home?” asked another passing neighbor.

“Yeah, I think they still are!”

Carol was popular in the village. Everyone smiled and greeted her warmly. She greeted them all back politely and eventually made it to the village gates.

“They’re so big!” Carol gasped. She had seen the gates several times before, but their sheer size never failed to astonish her.

Along with these gates, the village was surrounded by a stone wall, taller than two grown men. Once, the village had been a stronghold in a big war. When the soldiers left, refugees moved in, and it became a village. Now, the wall and the gates protected the villagers against monster attacks.

The gates were supposed to be open once the sun was up, but today they were closed. Not only that, but there were more people standing on the wall than usual. They were all armed and had grim expressions on their faces.

Despite the tension in the air, Carol raced up to them. Once she found who she was looking for, she threw herself at him joyfully.

“Gams!”

“Oh, hi, Carol. Sorry, but you can’t leave the village today,” Gams said, setting her back down on the ground.

“How come?” Carol asked.

Gams squatted down to look her in the eye. “It’s a special day. Look around. You’re the only kid here, see?”

It was only now that she looked around that she realized he was right. The area in front of the gates was very popular with the villagers. It was usually filled with merchants, adults chatting, and children playing. Today, it was empty, apart from the armed adults standing around tensely.

“Your folks are probably worried about you.”

“There you are, Carol!” As if she were summoned by Gams’s words, Lyra appeared and rushed up to her daughter. “I’ve got you now! No more running away!”

“Lemme go!” Carol wailed, giggling as she flailed in her mother’s arms.

“I’m sorry she’s such a bother,” Lyra said. “I’ll be sure to give her a real talking to!”

“Don’t be too hard on her,” said Gams.

“See you later, Gams!” Carol waved as Lyra carted her away.

Gams raised his hand in response. Only when Carol and her mother were out of sight did he turn back to the gates with a grim expression. He climbed up the ladder set against the stone wall and stared out into the distance with narrowed eyes at the clouds of dust being kicked up.

“I hope I *can* see you later, Carol,” Gams muttered, frowning at the approaching danger.

Carol returned home and was helping out with the chores when she noticed a

commotion outside.

“What’s happening today, Mommy? A big party?”

Lyra paused in her sewing and cast her gaze toward the window. “I wish it were. But don’t you worry. Tomorrow we can have a big feast.”

“Really? Yay!”

Carol leaped up and down in joy as her parents smiled at her sadly. They looked at each other and sighed before turning their attention back to the window. Carol was so short she couldn’t see what was happening outside, but they could. The villagers were rushing this way and that in a panic, boarding up their doors and windows. Some had already evacuated completely. Rodice himself had filled a few boxes with food and necessities, just in case. He’d also made sure the cart was fit to travel and the horses were ready to go. He really hoped none of it would be necessary.

This happened every month, but this time he felt particularly uneasy. Usually, he didn’t prepare for the worst-case scenario. Rodice turned his eyes toward the church and put his hands together to try and calm his nerves.

“Please, Lord, see us through this. May tomorrow be as peaceful and uneventful as always.” He prayed that his daughter could keep smiling.

“Rodice? Lyra? Are you all right?” Chem and her brother wrenched open the remains of their front door and stepped into the room. They let out a sigh of relief when they saw all three members of the family huddling together in the corner.

“We’re okay,” Rodice replied. “What happened to you two?” Rodice’s look of relief when his visitors weren’t monsters was replaced with concern—the two siblings were covered in blood.

“Don’t worry, this is all monster blood, and Chem’s been helping the wounded.” Gams had a few fresh cuts on him, but they’d been patched up with Chem’s magic.

“What’s the situation, Gams?” Rodice asked.

Gams shrugged. "I won't mince words. It's looking hopeless."

Rodice and Lyra gulped. Carol's eyes darted from one adult to the next as she struggled to comprehend what was happening.

"They've broken through the gates. There are monsters in the village. We've lost most of our fighters already."

"I'm worried, but there's nothing more we can do. We have to evacuate," said Chem.

Rodice got to his feet, an unusually determined look on his face. "The cart's stocked with emergency supplies and ready to go. Let's get going."

Rodice led them into the small storage area that doubled as their stable and checked over the horse and cart. Lyra took Carol with her into the canopy-covered cart. Rodice took the reins as Chem took up position at the cart's front. Once everyone was on board, Gams opened the doors in front of them, revealing the horrendous state the village was in.

The elderly couple across the way had been torn up by direwolves. Another couple had been beaten to death by goblins. Dead bodies lay scattered on the ground, and blood pooled between them. Some of the wooden houses were on fire, and the air reeked of fire and blood.

"Let's go," Gams said, climbing up next to Rodice.

Rodice bit his lip and chucked the reins. The cart sped out of the storage house, rushing past more villagers trying to make their own escapes. They cried for help again and again, and Rodice had to fight the urge to stop. He was a father; he had to keep going. He had to put his family first.

Gams felt the same. He could have sacrificed himself to help more people escape, but he needed to protect his sister and Rodice's family, who valued him and Chem as much as they did their own child. He hardened his heart against the pleas of the other villagers. Gams used a long spear to keep the monsters at bay as they made their escape.

"We can't go through the main gates, but they destroyed a part of the wall to the northwest. We can escape through there!" Gams said.

“Okay!” Rodice replied and turned the cart.

Houses that had stood tall just that morning were now burning wrecks. Their lively village was reduced to blood, fire, and monsters. The cart raced on, leaving behind corpses and panicked villagers. As they rushed away from their lives, they prayed desperately to find somewhere safe.

part 3

WORKING HARD,

FIGHTING HARD ↵

Chapter 1:

My Job and the Looming Day of Corruption

“**I** GOTTA CHECK UP on them as much as I can.”

I didn't have as much time to watch my villagers after I started my job, but I was working for their sakes. They were working really hard too, mostly on their defenses. The wooden fence that surrounded the entrance was no longer a rough collection of posts and planks—it had been reinforced with tightly packed logs and built up until it was as tall as Gams, then strengthened with new boards. But it had never been through a real attack—I worried how strong it actually was.

I decided to do a test—I stood up one of the logs that the villagers sent me and tried hitting it with a bat out in the corner of the garden. I only stopped when I felt eyes boring into the back of my head. I turned to see Mom staring at me, phone in her hand, looking concerned—I wrapped it up fast after that. Anyway, I found that it would take a *lot* of force to break the logs, at least.

Thankfully, the fence wasn't my villagers' only protection. They'd built a simple wooden watch tower right by the cave entrance. It would let them see over the fence and spot monsters

from farther away. Allegedly, this would also give Murus a spot to use his bow, but I couldn't be sure whether he would fight on the Day of Corruption—I had to assume one of the women would end up acting as a lookout up there instead. Murus was still hanging around the cave, and I was really starting to wonder when he planned to leave. If he wasn't going to help protect the others, he was probably planning to disappear in the chaos of the attack.

There were only three days left. Since this was the first Day of Corruption I'd be facing, I had to hope it would be like a tutorial stage and break me in gently. But by now I knew that *The Village of Fate* played by its own rules. I couldn't afford to let my guard down. If my village was wiped out, that was it. Every decision I made had to be a careful one.

I had 540 FP. I could use my paycheck to buy the rest of the points I needed for my golem. That golem seemed like my best bet for ensuring my village's survival, with or without Murus. I'd spent a lot of the last ten years playing video games—fighting games, FPSs, action games—so I was confident that I would have no trouble controlling the golem. But it wasn't just the Day of Corruption I wanted the golem for. Up until now, the only way I could “play” the game was by writing messages. I wanted to do more than that, and that feeling grew day by day. If I had a golem, I could help them out directly, instead of just sitting back and observing.

“Tonight's my last shift. Tomorrow, I'll spend the whole day preparing for the Day of Corruption.”

My boss mentioned they were short on people next month too, so he asked me to work a few days. I happily agreed. After tonight's shift, though, I should finally be able to afford my golem.

When my rate of FP went up with the villagers' offerings, I'd calculated that I'd hit my goal easily, but it seemed that the anxiety of recent days slowed things down. Gratitude was plentiful when their God actively helped them, but I hadn't performed any miracles lately, and my recent messages had all been fairly uninspiring—no wonder they weren't feeling particularly grateful. I'd thought about doing a small miracle in the hopes that I'd gain back more than I lost, but the one thing I tried—making it sunny when Lyra was complaining about her wet laundry—didn't seem to affect my points.

“I should work out how the game calculates FP...but later. For now, I gotta focus on keeping my villagers safe.”

I just hoped it would be enough. They had the fence and an escape route into the deepest part of the cave—they'd set up the only room that wasn't being used as a bedroom, an old storage room with wood-plank walls and tools strewn around, as an emergency shelter. But the biggest problem was still fighting power. Gams and Murus were still all I had—Rodice had no fighting experience, so he was assigned to the last line of defense inside the cave, and although Chem used to hunt with her brother and could fight a little, her

healing magic made her far too valuable to risk her on the front lines. I'd looked up some strategies from old civil wars in Japan, but I just didn't have enough people to make use of them. I'd thought about using traps, too, but none of my villagers had the expertise needed to make them. I even read through the *isekai* novels I'd picked up for any ideas, but again, the only decent ideas required more manpower than I had. That was all fantasy, anyway, so I don't know what I was expecting.

I sighed. I barely knew how to survive myself—I'd learned more useful information from *Murus* than I gained from my research. But I couldn't afford to let it get me down. I decided to look through the backlogs again, just in case I found anything that might help.

After eating lunch together that day, my villagers stayed in the cave, taking some time to rest. Gams polished his two favorite swords in silence. Chem was praying to my statue. No matter how busy things got, she always prayed three times a day, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. While my other villagers only put their hands together, she always got to her knees and prayed aloud.

"Please look over us again today, Lord."

My FP increased a little. It seemed at least half of the FP I gained from gratitude came from Chem alone.

"Could you put this on the shelf for me, dear?"

"Of course, just let me finish washing this."

Rodice and Lyra were clearing up after lunch and doing the dishes together. It wasn't unusual for Rodice to help out with chores when he had nothing else to do. Men were seen as more desirable when they did their share of the housework, after all—though knowing Lyra, I wondered if she'd trained him to do it.

"Gams... Are we gonna be okay on the Day of Construction?" Carol asked anxiously, tugging on his sleeve.

I *wanted* to believe it was an innocent question, and she wasn't trying to get Gams to coddle her. But I knew better.

“Corruption,” Gams corrected her. “Don’t worry. We’ve got all sorts of things to protect us from the monsters.”

“And you’ll protect me if any scary monsters attack me, right? ‘Cause you’re my big brother!” Carol smiled up at him, throwing her arms around his waist.

Chem was glaring pointedly at them both.

“I’ve told you a thousand times—he’s not *your* brother, Carol. He’s *mine*,” said Chem.

“Gams, she’s scaring me!” Carol wailed—her innocent act was actually very convincing.

“Okay, okay,” Chem sighed with a placating gesture. She looked at her brother. “Gams...how do you think we’ll do tomorrow...?”

“We’ve done all we can to prepare for the worst,” said Rodice, joining in the conversation. Lyra took his arm, her expression clouded.

The villagers turned their anxious gazes to Murus, who knew this forest better than anyone. He paused in his herb-mixing to answer their unspoken question.

“This is the Forbidden Forest, where many different monsters dwell. Even I tend to stay away when the Day of Corruption draws near. I’m afraid I cannot give you much hope.” Murus shook his head sadly—but I believed it about as much as I believed Carol’s crocodile tears.

“Please, don’t worry. We’re ever so grateful for your help. Thank you for everything you’ve done,” said Chem, smiling and bowing deeply at him. I wished so much that he was the kind, selfless person she thought he was.

“If only our cart could be fixed, we could get out of here,” said Rodice. “But... we can’t make it out of here by foot, can we?”

“Gams or I could likely make it out of the forest on foot,” Murus replied. “However, if we had to protect others, things would be...much more difficult.”

So, essentially, the rest of them would get in the way. The other villagers said nothing. They were probably thinking about how powerless they were.

“We’ll just have to hunker down and stay strong,” said Gams, determination in his voice. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you all. We’ll get through this.”

I glanced at Murus, curious to see his reaction. He was frowning anxiously, but I didn't know if his expression had anything to do with his true feelings.

Gams was also watching Murus. "Thanks for everything," he said to the physician. "Your help has been invaluable...but I don't think it's fair of us to drag you into our problems on the day itself."

Everyone apart from Carol copied his display of gratitude. Carol only did so after looking around and realizing she was the odd one out.

Murus stared at them all with wide eyes—he looked just as surprised as I felt. My villagers must have picked up on the fact that he was planning to leave. "There's no need to thank me. I should have told you earlier, but although I would love to help you, my family and loved ones are waiting for me. I was planning to take my leave tonight. I have been putting together some useful herbs before I leave."

Murus's expression was troubled, and it looked like he'd taken a long time to come to his decision. What was really going on inside his head?

"Are you leaving, Murus?" Carol asked.

"Yes, Carol. I'll be sorry to go."

"But you'll come see us again, right?" Carol reached out to squeeze his hand and looked up at him with watery eyes.

He patted her head gently in response. It would have been an emotional scene, if only I hadn't known what I did. Murus had been with my villagers for more than two weeks, and I wondered if living with my villagers had changed him. I still didn't know much about him, but he didn't seem like a bad man; he'd followed all my villagers' rules and customs while he was there, and I couldn't help but wonder whether someone was *forcing* him to spy on them. He'd never done anything to endanger them, and I hoped that meant that his kindness toward them was at least partially genuine.

Either way, with two days to go, we were a man down. But the determined look in my villagers' eyes told me they were already prepared to fight without him.

I leaned back in my chair and stretched, then I checked the time in the corner of my screen.

Oh, crap! I'm gonna be late for work!

Our company had a minivan that stopped by each worker's house to pick them up. It was due in ten minutes. I pulled on the light-green uniform they'd given me a few days ago and raced downstairs to find food on the table and Mom with a sympathetic smile. I wolfed down my dinner just in time.

"See ya, Mom!"

"Work hard, Yoshio!"

For the next few hours, it was time to forget about my village and focus on work.

Chapter 2:

My Coworker's Gaming Hobby and My Gaming Lifestyle

AS USUAL, I was pushing around the large vacuum cleaner. It always started off easy since the machine was empty, but the more water I sucked up, the heavier it became.

Everyone in the company was responsible for a different task. The boss polished the floor, and my female coworker Misaki-san worked on pushing out the dirty water. The other guy who worked with us, Yamamoto-san, mopped and waxed the floor. Though the three of them could manage just fine by themselves, apparently my presence was a huge help. I wiped the sweat on my brow away with the towel around my neck and let out a sigh.

Though I'd seen cleaners many times throughout my life, I always saw the job as beneath me. But I never imagined I'd get to this age without working. Now that I was a cleaner myself, I realized just how exhausting and detail-oriented the work was. You wouldn't guess it just by looking at him, but my boss had a real eye for detail and had a variety of techniques to get every nook and cranny sparkling clean. This job really wasn't as easy as it looked. I cringed, remembering when I'd thought I was too good for it.

After two hours of work, we had a ten-minute break. When I began this job, my screaming muscles would long for this break. Now, it was nice, but I didn't need it. I should've known better than to think my muscle training would make this job easier. Work and weightlifting were just different, and training my muscles didn't do much for my overall stamina. It was still probably better than starting from nothing, though.

I headed outside and bought myself a warm milk tea from the vending machine. My breath came out as white mist. These late November nights got cold.

"Milk tea fan, huh? I'm more of a regular tea guy, myself," Yamamoto-san

said as he stood in front of the vending machine.

Yamamoto-san was shorter and smaller than most men. He had dyed hair and piercings, which made me nervous to speak to him at first. But when I finally did, I realized he was just a decent, cheerful guy who was living his best life.

Misaki-san was making a phone call a little ways away from us. She never wore makeup, yet her confidence didn't seem to suffer. Misaki-san was a divorced single mother. I knew this because whenever I spoke to her, it was mostly complaints about her ex-husband. Though her story was pretty heavy, she told it with a jovial glint in her eye. Judging from the boss and Yamamoto-san's reactions, they heard the same stories tons of times—they listened with bored faces and gave the occasional grunt.

I didn't know what to say to Yamamoto-san's remark. All I could come up with was something incredibly boring.

"Regular tea is good, too."

"Hey, man, no need to be so nervous talking to me, okay? We're the same age."

"I know, but you've been here longer..."

"True. Well, take it at your own pace then, 'kay?"

"Thanks. I'll do my best."

"Hey—the harder you try, the harder it'll be." He grinned, sitting down next to me. I internally squirmed a little as he got into my personal space, but I kept my face neutral, and Yamamoto-san didn't seem to notice. After taking a gulp of his tea, he pulled out his phone and opened a game.

"Just gonna do my free gacha rolls for the day. I try and do 'em as soon as I remember, 'cause I'll forget if I leave it to later."

"Sure."

I knew he was into games. He played them on his phone, on his consoles, and even went to the arcade once a week or so.

"D'you play any mobile games?" he asked.

“I don’t actually have a phone. I haven’t needed one...”

“Ah, right. I guess if you had twenty-four-seven access to your computer, that’d be a better way to game anyway.” He glanced back at his phone.

“Dammit. Today was a bust, too.”

Yamamoto-san didn’t act any differently towards me when he found out I used to be a shut-in. In fact, he told me he was a shut-in too when he was younger, and his family was hard on him about it. I was grateful he told me—it made me feel less alone. In his words, he used to be a “depressed nerd,” but once he started working, he became “annoyingly cheerful.”

“Played any good games recently?” I asked.

“Oh, sure! There’s this game I’m super hooked on right now. The graphics are great, too. At first, I thought the premise was kinda weird, but I’m glad I gave it a chance.”

He reacted to my question more enthusiastically than I expected, leaning forward with excitement sparking in his eyes. I had a feeling I looked the same when I talked about my passions—that face was the mark of a true nerd.

“What’s it called?”

“Huh? Oh, right. It’s—”

“Back to work, guys! Break time’s over!” the boss called, drowning out the rest of Yamamoto-san’s words.

I was curious about the game, but it didn’t matter too much. I only had time for *The Village of Fate* right now, anyway. Once my shift today was over, I’d be able to focus fully on the game again, so I gave it my all for my last few hours.

“See you!”

“Bye!”

“You really helped me out, Yoshio. We’ll be getting a lot of work next month, since it’s the end of the year. I hope you’ll be around to join us again then, too.”

“Sounds great,” I said, surprised by my genuine enthusiasm.

My voice came out louder than I expected, and I rushed to cover my mouth when I remembered it was the middle of the night. As the van rolled away, I could see Miyuki-san and Yamamoto-san in the back seat, laughing at me but also waving as hard as they could. I waved back, a little embarrassed, before making my way inside my house.

As usual, the rest of my family was asleep. I ate my dinner, took a bath, and then returned to my room as quietly as I could. I sat in front of my computer to check on my villagers, but they were all asleep.

Murus's room was empty except for some packets of herbs. He must have already left. "I should probably just be grateful he left medicine and didn't sabotage anything on the way out."

His people seemed so wary of my villagers, but Murus seemed to genuinely care about them. He'd left a small note that outlined which mixtures did what and how much to take. I couldn't believe that he actually wanted to hurt them anymore, which would have to be enough for now. Maybe he'd come back after the Day of Corruption.

By the time I finished my bath, it was past midnight—officially the day before the Day of Corruption. But after such a long day, I could barely keep my eyes open. If I kept playing now, I'd only end up doing something stupid. I decided to sleep now so I could stay up for the entire twenty-four hours of the Day of Corruption.

I woke up, rolled over, and checked my alarm clock.

"It's twelve already?!"

Jumping out of bed, I hopped onto my PC to find my villagers hard at work.

"Oh, right. It's twelve *noon*. Okay...we're okay."

I opened the curtains to allow the dazzling sunlight to spill into my room. Once tomorrow was over, my villagers and I would all go on with our lives in peace. Taking deep breaths to calm myself down, I sat back in my chair and started checking up on them in detail. Everyone looked as grim as I expected. Gams was having trouble keeping still, constantly switching between sword

training and keeping an eye out from the watchtower. Chem polished my statue whenever she had a spare moment. Rodice was checking their supplies and reinforcing the fence, and Lyra was doing laundry in silence. Though their activities were no different than usual, they spoke much less.

Just watching them was making me more nervous about tomorrow. Even Carol was behaving today, as though she knew the adults didn't have time to focus on her. She was silently helping her dad with the fence and repairing weapons.

"Everyone looks so down. Wonder if there's anything I can do."

The first thing that came to mind was to write them a prophecy that would help calm their fears. But what exactly should I write? Should I try and add a little humor to make them laugh? Probably not. That wasn't a very godlike thing to do.

I always had trouble with the daily prophecy, but today was particularly bad. Maybe I could tell them that I would step in if they were in danger or something. Or maybe...

After writing draft after draft, I finally had something I was happy with. Or as happy as I could be right now. I pressed the enter button. The moment the book in front of my statue began to glow, my villagers raced towards it. They really were restless today.

"The Lord has sent us a prophecy!" said Chem. "'My devout villagers, I am sure you are all worried about the upcoming Day of Corruption. Do not forget that I shall be watching over you. If any of you find yourselves in danger, be assured that I shall be able to give you a single helping hand.'"

There. By limiting it to "a single helping hand," I hoped that they'd be reassured but also know not to rely on me too much. I also hoped that it'd make them realize the golem was on their side once I summoned it. Though maybe I should've just mentioned the golem in the prophecy itself...

"The God of Fate is watching over us!" Chem announced.

"Right! There's no need to be so down!" Gams added as the darkness lifted from both his and his sister's faces.

“As long as He is watching over us, we have nothing to fear!” said Rodice.

“Right. So stop being such a coward, and get ready to fight...*dear!*” Lyra said.

“And we got Gams to protect us, too!” Carol added.

Their faces brightened up a little, and they started to chat like they had before, the usual cheer thick in the air. I nodded to myself, satisfied that the problem of morale, at least, was solved.

I couldn’t send another message until after midnight, and I didn’t want to waste any FP. I was tempted to summon my golem right away and test it out, but I still had no idea how that would work. What if it disappeared after a certain amount of time? I couldn’t risk getting it too early. The golem was the “helping hand” I mentioned in my prophecy; I had to save it for when it was truly needed.

That means there’s nothing else I can do! Guess I’ll make some lunch.

Since it was a weekday afternoon, everyone else was out. I treated myself to a cup noodle and fried up some mysterious meat the villagers sent me. For dessert, I had an unidentifiable piece of fruit—another offering, of course.

“This is really good.”

The meat was similar to pork and had a good bite to it. Its rich juices had just a hint of sweetness to them.

Heh, this food is so good I’m starting to sound like a food critic. My family had been eating all these offerings for a while now, and no one had gotten sick. Dad even said his lumbago had improved, and Mom’s insomnia went away. I used to have bad indigestion, but I hadn’t had any issues with it for a while now. This food must be super nutritious to cure all our problems. I wondered if rich people ate this kind of thing all the time—that thought made it seem luxurious to me, on top of everything else.

As I was tidying up the dishes, the phone rang. Even just a month ago, I would’ve let it ring, but this time I picked up. It was all thanks to my job and my practice speaking to strangers.

“Hello?”

“Yoshio-kun? I’m so glad you’re there,” my boss boomed. I found myself checking the calendar instinctively, but sure enough I wasn’t supposed to work today. I began to worry I’d made a mistake.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, no! I was just wonderin’ if you’re free today? I’m kinda short on people, and this job came in at the last minute...”

Technically, I did have plans. But I couldn’t imagine refusing him because I was planning on playing a video game where I didn’t even need to do anything. I was already formulating some vague excuse in my head, but...this man had gone out of his way to give me a job despite my lack of experience and without even knowing me. I had to help my villagers, but that was a game, and this was a real, live human being. It should have been a no-brainer for any regular person, but I found myself hesitating.

“What time will we finish? I’ve got plans tomorrow...” I said.

“Don’t worry, I remember. They want us done on the early side, so we should be finished around nine at the latest.”

Nine, huh? I’d have plenty of time to eat and even have a bath, and I’d already determined there was nothing more I could do today. Working tonight and earning a little more money for FP might be helpful. I decided to go for it.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll start getting ready.”

“Thanks a bunch! I’ll be right there to pick you up, okay? I really owe you one! Sorry for the short notice, but Yama called out last minute.”

Yama is Yamamoto-san, I guess. Hope he’s okay...

There’d probably be times in the future when I suddenly needed a day off to deal with something in my village. If I did a favor for the boss now, I could probably cash it in later. Though maybe I was getting ahead of myself by thinking a few extra hours’ work counted as a favor.

Chapter 3:

The Day of Corruption and My Lack of Oxygen

“DAMMIT!” I shouted as I raced through the night, gasping for air. I checked the time on the watch Dad lent me—it was half-past one in the morning, meaning it was already the Day of Corruption. For all I knew, my villagers might already be under attack. I had to get home, and fast—my legs slammed into the pavement faster than they ever had before, spurred on by the terrifying possibility that my villagers were already dead.

Work had run late. The client was demanding, and we’d ended up having to clean places that we hadn’t been contracted for. My boss had tried to insist that none of it had been part of the deal, but the client insisted, and eventually he’d given in. He’d told me I could go home, but I refused. With all hands on deck, the extra work hadn’t taken more than an hour, but then there were delays getting home. The road back was closed due to an accident. Of all the days for a streak of bad luck!

The cold winter air filled my lungs and made my chest ache, but I still pushed onward. I eventually made it home, collapsing onto the porch.

“What was that?! Yoshio, what’s wrong?!” Mom rushed towards me, already in her pajamas.

“I’m fine,” I gasped. “I just—I just ran home...”

“You’re covered in sweat! Well, the bath is ready for you.”

“I’ll take one later,” I promised. “There’s just somethin’ I gotta do first.”

I felt bad that I’d woken her up so late at night, but I couldn’t dwell on that tinge of guilt. I climbed upstairs and sat down in front of my computer without even bothering to take my overalls off. All of my villagers were in the cave except Gams, who was sitting outside with a weapon.

“Looks like we’re good for now...”

Everyone in the cave was in bed, but only Carol was asleep. I knew Gams must’ve told them to get some rest, but they were probably too anxious. I

thought about taking a quick bath, but if something happened while I was in there, I'd never forgive myself. Sweaty as I was, I could go one day without bathing. I mean, my villagers didn't even *have* baths. They just wiped themselves down.

"Why are you stomping around at this time of night?!"

I turned around to see Sayuki standing at my bedroom door, which I'd forgotten to close in my hurry. I swiveled my chair towards her, making sure to position it so she couldn't see what was on the screen.

"Sorry, I didn't know you were awake. I was just in a hurry—but I won't make any more noise. You can go back to bed."

"All right." Sayuki turned around to leave, but then she stopped.

I gritted my teeth. I needed her out of here so I could focus on the village.

"You stink. If you lounge around in your dirty clothes like that, you're going to get sick. Go take a bath."

"Yeah, yeah, I will. Just, later."

"I know you're lying. You did that thing where you look to the left."

I suddenly realized why Sayuki was always so good at seeing through my lies. I made a mental note to be more careful next time.

"You've been leaving your computer on and playing that game for ages. Is there an event today or something?" she asked.

"How d'you know that?" I asked. Had she been coming into my room while I was out?

"What, the event? Or the game? Mom told me about the game. Said you told her never to turn off your computer."

Mom had a habit of coming into my room without asking, so I'd asked her to leave my computer be.

I didn't know what to tell Sayuki. Didn't the letter say something about losing my rights to play if I spread information about the game online? That meant I probably shouldn't say anything to Sayuki, either. I decided to wing it.

“Yeah, there’s an event. Except this game’s still in development, and I’m testing it. Getting paid for it, too. If I leak any information about it, I’ll be fired and have to pay damages as well. So don’t tell anyone, okay?” I looked her straight in the eye, making sure I didn’t do that weird “looking left” thing she was talking about.

She returned my gaze evenly before suddenly snapping it away and muttering something to herself.

“Well, whatever.”

“Huh? What?”

“Nothing. If you’re worried about your game, I can keep an eye on it while you have a bath. Can’t play properly if you get sick.”

Why was she mad now? Did I really stink that bad? I sniffed myself to check, but all I could smell was the detergent we used at work.

She was right about one thing though. If I did get sick, I wouldn’t be able to protect my villagers today. In any case, arguing with her would probably take longer than just giving in.

“All right. I’ll be quick, so just watch the game for me till then. There’s supposed to be an event today, but they didn’t say what time it starts, so I can’t leave my computer. If you see any monsters, can you come get me straight away?”

“I’ll look out for these monsters of yours. Just be quick, okay?” she grumbled.

Despite her tone, my sister was a woman of her word, so I felt safe leaving my villagers in her hands.

I grabbed my underwear, sweatshirt, and pants—the usual clothes I wore to sleep—made my way to the bathroom, and stripped down. I washed myself before getting into the bath for only a few seconds. I was about to leave again when I realized Sayuki would probably get mad if I didn’t at least wash my hair, so I hurriedly did that, too.

Once I was out of the bath, I dried myself off as quickly as I could. I pulled my sweatsuit on and wrapped a towel around my wet hair. My skin was still a little

wet, making my clothes cling to me, but I knew I'd dry out soon enough. I picked up the dinner Mom had left out for me, grabbed a bottle of tea, and headed back to my room.

Sayuki was staring at the screen with a blank expression on her face.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem. Oh, you found that, huh?" Sayuki said, noticing the plate in my hand. She was staring at it; maybe she was hungry. "Are you sure you even washed properly? You took, like, two seconds."

"Don't worry. I'm sweat-free now. Anything happen in the game?"

"Nope. No one's even moving. I was just thinking that the graphics are super good, though. It looks realistic enough to be a live-action movie."

I didn't reply, just sat with my back to her on the floor and unwrapped my dinner. If she couldn't see my face, any lies I told would go undetected.

"Yeah, it's a cutting-edge game. The budget is huge."

"You're hiding something. You only turn your back like that when you're feeling guilty."

Ugh! Again?!

All these years of her being way too perceptive were finally starting to make sense. This must be why I'd lost so many little contests and games to her over the years. It seemed weird to learn something new about my sister after all this time.

"Yeah, I guess I am hiding something. But I swear it's nothing bad," I told her snippily, turning around.

Her gaze met mine, and neither of us looked away this time.

"It's something you can't tell me or Mom and Dad, right?"

"Yeah. For the moment, at least."

"All right. Guess I'll go to bed then...Oniichan."

I was so taken aback that I couldn't get out a reply. Sayuki didn't wait for one before leaving me alone in my room.

“I can’t remember the last time we spoke so much. It’s kinda like old times...” I smiled to myself for a moment before I realized. “Oh, right! I gotta check on my village.”

It was important that I didn’t let anything distract me from the village today. Just as Sayuki said, everything was quiet for the time being. I zoomed out until I could see the full visible map, but there wasn’t a monster to be seen. I finally decided that I could relax a little. I picked up my food and drink from the floor and put them on my desk.

“Two hours gone, and twenty-two to go. I can’t let my guard down.”

It’s gonna be a long day.

I quietly took a bite of my rice ball.

Eventually, day broke in both *The Village of Fate* and the real world. By half-past six, my villagers had already gathered for breakfast.

“I used to be so good at staying up all night,” I said with a yawn. “I guess it’s all that hard labor I’m doing now.”

I rubbed at my eyes and slapped my cheeks, but the waves of sleepiness kept coming.

Maybe I should take a nap...

No, that was a terrible idea. I worked for this day for too long. If something happened while I slept, it would all be for nothing. I had to push myself just a little longer.

“Guess I’ll have some coffee.” I checked to make sure there weren’t any monsters on the map before going downstairs.

Mom was in the kitchen, and Dad was in the bathroom. I didn’t realize they’d be up so early. I guess they’d done this almost every day for the last few decades, just like the rest of civilized society. The more I thought about it, the more it impressed me.

There were only empty plates left on the dining table, which told me that Sayuki had already left for work. She usually put her own dishes in the sink, so

she must've been in a hurry today. I did it for her this morning—I disturbed her sleep last night, after all.

“Oh, you're up early after you came home so late last night,” said Mom.

“Remember—I told you I have a thing to do at the end of the month? I gotta talk to the villagers online today, and I need to be ready for it.”

“Sounds like you're working hard.” Dad emerged from the bathroom, freshly shaved and hair gelled.

“I guess.”

I didn't want to hang around much longer in case they got suspicious, so I grabbed a can of coffee from the refrigerator and made to go back to my room.

“Don't you want breakfast?”

“No thanks, I'm still full from dinner last night,” I called over my shoulder.

When I was back, I immediately checked my computer, but everything was still peaceful. Rodice was on guard while Gams was in his room taking a nap.

“I'll be fine... I'll be fine! The monsters don't come out in the morning anyway...” Rodice muttered to himself, his spear at the ready.

The next moment, he squealed as a lone leaf drifted by on the wind. I sighed, deciding I'd better keep watch myself.

“I wonder what the women are up to.”

I moved the view back inside the cave. Gams was the only one in one of the rooms, and though he had his eyes closed, he wasn't sleeping. Everyone else was sheltering in the cave, and Carol was playing alone with some building blocks.

“Why can't it be tomorrow already?” she sighed sadly.

“I hope Rodice isn't pushing himself too hard,” Lyra said as she worked on the cleaning and the laundry.

“Dear Lord, please allow us all to live to see tomorrow together,” Chem prayed in front of my statue.

Everyone seemed restless, although they were trying to keep their anxiety to

themselves. I couldn't blame them; I was exactly the same.

"I hope nothing happens...but this is a video game. It's kinda cruel of them to make me keep watch for twenty-four hours, though," I grumbled aloud, even though I knew the devs wouldn't hear me. Anxiety and apprehension raged together in my stomach. I didn't want anything to happen, but I was also kind of hoping for a little excitement. Still, all I could do was watch.

Even after lunch, everything was quiet. Aside from leaving to use the bathroom, I spent the entire morning sitting in my chair and watching. Sleep threatened to overtake me again and again, but each time I forced myself to snap out of it.

"Maybe I *should* nap."

I was good at getting up when I needed to, so if they sounded an alarm or something when the monsters came, I would be ready to leap into action. The issue was I still had no idea what to expect today.

I was just thinking about another coffee when I noticed something among the trees outside the village fence. I quickly turned up the volume on my computer. I could hear a rustling. Gams, who was on watch, noticed as well. Unsheathing his swords, he peered over the fence. The next moment, the game let out a blaring siren and red text appeared on the screen.

"The Day of Corruption is here!"

Oh, so there was a notification. I'd keep it in mind for next time. I leaned forward to stare at the screen, holding my breath as five direwolves appeared from the forest.

The Day of Corruption had finally begun.

Chapter 4:

The Advancing Monsters and My Wavering Judgment

GAMS RUSHED DOWN the watchtower ladder. The direwolves were around five meters away and advancing steadily towards the fence.

“So we gotta deal with these first,” I muttered, remembering that they had poison fangs.

Last time, Gams had managed to fight off two of them. Now there were *five*, and he was still taking them on alone. Maybe the fence would stop them, and they’d go home...

I watched as one of the direwolves moved closer to the fence and sniffed, then took a few steps back. Suddenly, it began to run, then leapt and easily cleared the fence. But it didn’t get far.

Gams put a spear through the wolf’s belly just as it started its descent; he saw it through one of the many peepholes in the fence and timed his strike perfectly. I was glad the peepholes paid off—I’d suggested they make them.

Gams shook the wolf off the spear and let it drop outside the fence, dead, maybe hoping to send a message that jumping over was a bad idea and they should leave. What they actually did was completely unexpected. As soon as the body plopped down, they leapt on it and gobbled it up. Well...that was horrifying.

Their packmate devoured, the other four wolves stepped back from the fence together.

“They can’t be planning to charge all at once...”

A moment later, they showed me how wrong I was when they charged and leapt over the fence in unison. I didn’t think Gams could deal with four at once, but he showed off his dual-wielding abilities, spearing two of them right out of the air. The other two made it inside the fence.

He tossed aside the spears and pulled out his two swords. He stabbed one of the wolves before it could regain its feet from a rocky landing, then turned and

slit the other's throat.

"Damn, he's stronger than I thought. Guess I underestimated him." I found myself bowing at the screen by way of apology, wondering if I'd even need to summon the golem. When Gams wasn't distracted by having to defend other people, he was *unstoppable*.

"Wow, Gams! You're so cool!" Carol jumped out from the cave's entrance.

Chem followed her out. "I knew you could do it, *Brother!*"

"Stay back, you two," Gams warned, holding out a hand to stop them. "There might be more."

I checked the map, but things were quiet again. It'd be a waste to write a prophecy just to let them know, though.

"I can't see any monsters. I think we're safe!" Rodice proclaimed from the top of the watchtower, his hand to his brow as he looked around. At least he was acting brave now.

"Don't lean so far forward!" Lyra called from below.

"Since there are no monsters, could you help me?" Gams asked.

"Sure! I'll do anything!" Carol promised.

"Stay back, Carol. This is not a day for children to do anything but *hide*. Now, what would you like me to do, Gams?" Chem asked, pushing her way into his personal space along with Carol.

At first, Gams looked a little fed up, but then he nodded and clapped his hands like he'd just thought of something. "Could you two help me carry the dead wolves to the other side of the fence?"

He pointed towards the wolves on the ground. The girls' faces fell.

"I'll help Gams with the wolves, too," said Rodice, now down from the watchtower.

He began to pull one of the bodies away, the spear still inside it. Gams gave each girl a quick pat on the head before joining him.

"I have a job we can all do together! Could you come and help?" Lyra called.

The two girls scampered inside as fast as they could.

“That’s the first wave dealt with. I just hope they’re all this easy...” I muttered to myself.

There were a few more monster attacks that day, but Gams killed them all without issue. Chem healed his minor injuries with her magic. I kept track of when the monsters attacked and soon worked out that each new wave arrived either thirty minutes or an hour after the last. The longer they took to respawn, the more brutal the attack—the waves after an hour had more monsters than the half-hour waves. So far, the monsters had all arrived in groups. At first, it was mostly direwolves, but then I started to see some boar-like monsters that I was extremely familiar with—the source of the meat my villagers kept sending me. After this, they’d have meat for days—which meant my family and I would have meat for days.

I clicked on one of the boars. Apparently, they were called “boarnabies.” It was a weirdly cute name for something that looked so intimidating; it made them sound more grumpy than scary. But the truth was, they were harder to deal with than the wolves. They rammed against the fence again and again, and it was only a matter of time until the logs collapsed.

Luckily, my villagers had a plan. They set several sharp stakes in front of the fence, at the same height as the pigs’ heads. The pigs launched themselves into these stakes and killed themselves without Gams needing to lift a finger. After an attack, Gams and Rodice would go collect their bodies, freeing up the stakes and getting the good meat inside for processing.

“So far, so good,” I said to myself.

Everything was going much better than I expected, although I guess I had the cave to thank for that. Gams had already fought off five waves of monsters all by himself. I even saw him taking on three at once. I was really impressed, but even so, securing some more fighters had to be my next goal.

It was starting to get dark both in real life and in the game world. I checked the time. It was already past five in the evening.

“Most monsters are nocturnal, right? I guess things are gonna start getting serious now.”

My villagers knew this, too. They made Gams take a rest while Rodice and Chem kept watch. I was worried about him wearing himself out too early. I had trouble after a few hours on the vacuum cleaner, so I could only imagine the strain he was feeling right now. If he got too exhausted, mentally or physically, he might make a mistake. The thought made me even more nervous.

“It might be time to make my move soon.”

Once the current wave concluded, I took the opportunity to dart downstairs and tell my mom I wouldn’t be joining the family for dinner as I grabbed myself some snacks and drinks.

“But I’m making that fried chicken you like so much! Are you sure?”

“Sorry, Mom, but I really can’t,” I called back to her as I returned upstairs. Though the thought of her fried chicken was making my mouth water... I hoped I could get down there when it was ready and grab some to take upstairs.

I set down my food and drinks around my computer. I turned my clock towards me to keep an eye on the time. This whole scenario reminded me of another game, an MMO with a special event that only gave players two days to hunt down a rare monster. The monster spawned once every hour, and I remember waiting and keeping watch near the spawn points. I also remember feeling like I was taking the game really seriously, but that was nothing compared to protecting my village.

Game or not, I wanted to protect these people. They’d given me a new lease on life. They’d saved me, and I wanted to pay them back for that.

“Just a little over six hours left. You can do it, guys!”

I wasn’t about to let my guard down. Not now.

I chewed on fried chicken as I kept watch. The next attack came just after seven o’clock, the first attack after sunset. This was the first time two different types of monsters teamed up—five direwolves and three boarnabies. I figured it

was too much to ask that the wolves attack the pigs instead of my villagers.

Rodice was on the watchtower. He spotted the monsters just a little after I did.

“M-monster attack! Five direwolves and three boarnabies!” he cried.

The next moment, the door to the cave swung open and Gams jumped out. Chem and Carol made to follow him, but he put up a hand to stop them.

“Thanks, Rodice! Please get back inside, all of you!” said Gams.

“Be careful out there, okay? Don’t push yourself too hard,” Rodice replied.

Once the door was shut and everyone was safely inside, Gams picked up his spears.

“I gotta push myself or I can’t defeat them,” he replied under his breath, though mostly to himself.

His words only made it clearer how badly they needed more fighters. As usual, Gams took a position close to the fence and prepared a spear in each arm. He slayed two of them as they jumped and took the heads off two more with his swords shortly after. I let out a sigh of relief once he only had one more to deal with...until I heard the loud crash of several logs falling.

“They broke through?!” I gasped.

Two of the pigs came tumbling in through the big hole they’d created in the fence. I looked for the other one to find its head impaled on a stake. The remaining wolf leaped at Gams, taking advantage of the distraction. He rolled to the floor, only just managing to dodge it. Now, though, he was surrounded by three monsters.

“Should I summon the golem?” I paused, though—after everything I’d seen Gams do, I thought he could handle this.

The two pigs rushed towards Gams, who wasted no time picking up one of the spears lying at his feet and using it like a pole to vault over them. The second his feet met the ground, he spun around and tossed the spear at one of the pigs, putting a swift end to its life.

“That’s one,” he muttered to himself.

The second pig was by the cave entrance. It skidded around to face Gams before charging at him once more. I was curious about the remaining direwolf, but when I looked, it already had a dagger sticking out of its head. With only one enemy left to deal with, the odds were in his favor. All it took was a single strike.

Five monsters, and he dispatched them all with no trouble at all. Manly, strong, and effortlessly competent—it was no surprise to me that he was popular with the ladies of the cave. Even the way he wiped the sweat off his brow was captivating. Chem and Carol probably would've been extremely jealous of the front-row seat I had of his fighting prowess.

"Now that that's over with, we should fix up the fence."

Without even pausing for breath, Gams got started on the repairs. The other villagers brought him some replacement logs from inside the cave.

"Let's try to make it even stronger than before!" Chem said.

"Right! You go in and rest, Gams—we'll take care of this. If you collapse, we're done for. Carol, get him inside!"

"Okay! C'mon, Gams! Nap time!" Carol was more than happy to follow Lyra's order.

I could tell that Gams wanted to insist he could keep going, but he did as they said, sitting on the ground and watching everyone work with a dissatisfied frown on his face. Chem worked hard to make up for her brother, but she was no match for Rodice, who did the majority of the work.

"Could you get me a needle and thread?" Rodice asked Chem.

"Of course! I'll be back right away!"

"Lyra, come help me over here," he called.

"Coming! What do you need?"

I was pleased to see Rodice giving out orders so confidently. It was hard to believe he was the same man who flinched at a leaf. Even if Gams overshadowed him a lot of the time, he was reliable in his own way.

I kept watch on the surrounding area to make sure nothing would sneak up

on them while they worked. If I spotted anything, I'd send them a prophecy immediately.

Thanks to the villagers' practicing over the last few days, they had the fence repaired in no time. Afterward, they reinforced it with wooden planks.

The next attack brought eight monsters. Seemed like it would just get worse from here on out. Just then, I noticed something moving in the forest nearby. I looked closer. It wasn't just one or even two monsters. There were five, ten, fifteen...more than twenty of them. As I struggled to count them, a warning appeared on the screen in big, red letters.

"The Day of Corruption: Final Wave!"

The words flashed repeatedly, and a piercing alarm sounded.

"Guess this is the boss fight! I'm so ready!" I grinned.

"Everyone, into the cave! I can sense them... There are loads of them!" Gams shouted, jumping to his feet.

None of the villagers argued with the alarmed look on his face. They ran back into the cave without another word. The thick bushes of the forest parted to reveal a group of monsters twenty strong.

Chapter 5:

My Villagers' Brush with Death and My Determination

THE ONLY SILVER LINING was that this was the last wave.

There was a new enemy this time: the orcs from the opening sequence. I clicked on them to discover they were simply called “green goblins.” They were more humanlike in appearance than the other monsters, and they seemed to have the intelligence to match as they set about destroying the stakes in the fence with their clubs. The pigs then crashed into the fence, sending the rest of the stakes flying along with several logs.

Monsters swarmed inside, their sights set on Gams as they charged. He sent a spear flying at a goblin, and though it struck its target, he was unable to defend himself against the stampede of pigs. First he went flying into the air, and then he crashed to the ground, bouncing and rolling like one of Carol’s dolls.

He tried to stand up but only made it to his knees as he gasped for breath. The monsters swarmed him. Despite the bad stance and his injuries, Gams managed to cut a few of them down, but I knew he couldn’t last much longer.

“Gams!” Chem cried, peering out from inside the cave, tears in her eyes as she caught sight of him.

“Chem! Stay calm!” Rodice warned her.

“I know how you feel, but you must stay with us,” Lyra urged.

They were holding her tightly to stop her from jumping into the fray. Carol said nothing, but she was trembling and her face was pale. At this rate, they’d all be killed.

“I can’t sit back and watch—time to summon the golem!”

I already had the miracles menu open, and I clicked the button. That moment, the game screen glowed white and switched to a first-person view. I was inside the cave, looking at Rodice’s family and Chem staring up at me in astonishment. I was tempted to see what this thing could do, but this wasn’t the time.

“So this is the golem’s perspective, huh?”

I grabbed my gamepad. The controls were in the bottom-left corner of the screen, and they seemed pretty standard. I jumped over the altar and took a weapon from the wall. When I tried sprinting, the golem moved faster than I expected. I always thought golems were supposed to be slow, sluggish creatures, but apparently not in this world.

I tried swinging the sword as I ran, and it moved exactly as I wanted. If this golem’s agility was a mistake, it was the kind of mistake I could live with. My golem form was maybe a little taller than Gams and functioned like the human protagonists of most of the action games I played—the familiarity was a relief. I ran past Chem and the others and leaped out of the cave.

“The God of Fate...” I saw Chem murmur.

She recognized me instantly, which made me wonder if the golem was glowing with divine light or something. From my perspective, I wouldn’t be able to see anything like that.

Gams was still fighting outside. He had blood running down his face, and his right arm hung limp by his side. He was covered in wounds, but he still fought on.

“I can’t...let them in! Even if I die!” Gams glared at the monsters. Any normal person would have collapsed under the weight of those injuries.

“I’m really proud of you, Gams. Now let me handle the rest!”

I moved forward and cut down the direwolf that was digging its fangs into his leg. My blade sliced right through it—this golem was just as powerful as I’d hoped. Raising my sword once more, I prepared to attack the boarnaby charging at me. I waited for the right timing and then hit the button to attack, slicing the pig cleanly in two. The two halves of its body continued past me before slamming to the ground behind me. Gams could also kill monsters with a single swing, but he only managed it by carefully avoiding hitting any bone—not even he could slice a creature from head to tail through sheer power. Saving up my FP for so long had been worth it!

I launched myself into the fray, swinging my sword this way and that. Each

strike reduced their numbers. I wasn't taking much damage, either; I'd spent the day studying the monsters and their attack patterns so I'd be ready. The direwolves always crouched down before they leaped, so I just needed to sidestep at the right time. The pigs always charged ahead in a straight line, so simply holding out my sword meant they impaled themselves on it.

I didn't have any information on the green goblins, but I was sure I'd learn quickly. I hadn't been playing games all these years for nothing. Part of me wanted to let the enemies attack me to see how much my golem could withstand, but I decided against that, just in case it was a glass cannon.

If the monsters cooperated with each other instead of following their individual instincts, this would have been a harder fight, for sure. But only the goblins seemed to put any thought into their attacks. Good thing they weren't particularly strong. A quick slash of my sword sent their heads flying into the air.

The only downside was, I was much better at third-person games than first-person.

Wait! I can change the view!

The option was right there, tucked away at the bottom of the box explaining the controls to me. Dodging another attack, I clicked on that button, and sure enough the camera changed so that I was looking out from behind my golem's body.

Huh?

The golem wasn't at all the sturdy stone giant I'd imagined. Its body was a dusky brown color, but its head was small, and it had long, tied-back hair that reached its hips. It was even wearing some sort of dress with a cloth tied at the waist. I moved the camera around to look at it from the front.

"It's kinda beautiful..."

Its androgynous face was adorned with a soft, loving smile that never seemed to waver. In one word, it was divine.

The golem wore armor over its forearms and calves that reminded me of the Roman gladiators you sometimes saw in films. Even as I gawked at it in surprise, I kept slaying the monsters around me. The way it moved really was as beautiful

and elegant as you'd expect from a deity brought down to earth. Even the blood spraying around it couldn't take away its breathtaking divinity.

Maybe this was what the God of Fate canonically looked like. That would explain why Chem recognized me. The color of its body was less like stone and more like wood. Come to think of it, I spawned right by the altar... Was this body actually the statue that Chem and Gams made? To think that such a simple, crudely built statue could turn into something so incredibly elegant, like it was made by the world's greatest sculptors!

I was still confused about why they'd call this a golem when it wasn't made of stone or earth, though I supposed some games and novels had golems made of metal, or even a patchwork of dead bodies—and maybe I'd heard of a wooden golem before, too.

If my golem was made of wood, it might be quite fragile. I was glad I hadn't tested that before. Anyway, all that mattered was that I could use it to protect my villagers.

Once I defeated every last enemy, I put my gamepad back on my desk. I smiled to myself as I chugged the end of my bottle of tea.

"Finally, I actually did something godlike." Hopefully, I could keep using the golem to protect my villagers.



“The Day of Corruption is over. No more monsters will appear today.”

A triumphant jingle played as those red words appeared on the screen. We’d made it, and we could finally relax. I couldn’t help but launch a victorious fist into the air.

“Yeah! Yeah! Yessss!” I even leaped out of my chair and cheered, joy erupting through my entire body.

“Yoshio! Keep it down!” I heard Mom yell from downstairs.

Once I’d calmed down again, I turned back to the game to check on Gams’s condition. All my villagers were gathered around the golem.

“He is certainly gallant! Thank you so much, Lord,” said Chem.

“Thank you for stepping in to save my life, Lord.”

“Wow! The statue came to life!”

“He did, didn’t He, Carol? It’s thanks to Him that we all made it,” said Lyra.

“Thank you, Lord, for saving my family, Chem, and Gams,” said Rodice.

There were tears of gratitude rolling down Chem’s cheeks. Gams put his arm around her and pulled her in close. Carol was hopping around as though she couldn’t contain her joy. Her parents were watching her and holding each other as they wailed in relief. The extent of their gratitude made me feel embarrassed more than anything else. I could feel my cheeks heating up, even though I knew it was just a game.

As their God, I had to reply to their thanks somehow. There was some way to raise the golem’s hand, I thought... What was that again? But when I tried to do it, it didn’t work.

“Huh? Did it break? Maybe it shuts down after a certain amount of time...” I glanced at the controls at the bottom of the screen.

“Using the golem consumes Fate Points. If you run out of Fate Points, you will no longer be able to use the golem. Additionally, you may only use the golem once a day.”

“What’s with all these restrictions?”

I checked my FP in the corner of the screen—zero. I'd had plenty, even after summoning the golem, but using it for a few minutes had completely emptied them out. Thousands of FP, gone! I didn't even want to think about how much money that cost me!

I'd had high hopes for my golem, but it turned out I'd need to be very careful not to overuse it.

"This thing uses more gas than an American car! Not that I've ever driven one."

Not only was it expensive to buy, it was expensive to run, too. The least they could've done was warn me!

I sighed, my shoulders drooping. It was painful to realize how much money I'd burned through. I decided to only use the golem for emergencies from now on.

"Guess I gotta keep working now. The microtransactions in this thing are even worse than those gacha games."

It was kind of depressing to think that a whole day's wages could be gone in a split second like that. But...I got my job to protect my villagers in the first place, and that was exactly what I'd done.

"The Day of Corruption is over, and everyone survived! I should be celebrating!" I focused back on the screen, deciding to be happy.

My villagers were calmer now as they carried my wooden statue back to the altar. I felt bad for making them carry it, but with no FP, there wasn't much else I could do. Once my statue was back in place, Chem held her hands out in front of her and they began to glow, the light streaming into Gams's wounds—she was using her healing magic on Gams's injuries. His wounds closed up before our eyes. It was a shame her magic couldn't help with exhaustion, but this was extremely handy.

"Looks like Gams is out of danger. Oh, right! I should use the prophecy to tell them there won't be any more attacks today."

I did just that, praising them for their hard work. As soon as they read the prophecy, they fell to the ground in relief.

“Good work, guys. Now, get some rest.”

My villagers ate their dinner a little later than usual. I kept an eye on things as they did. The area inside the fence was littered with dead pigs; unlike most games, the dead enemies didn't despawn. Leaving them there might attract more monsters, so my villagers needed to deal with them. For now, they dragged all the monsters they couldn't eat into the holes they'd already dug to be buried—though burning them would probably be better for hygiene. I zoomed in, double-checking that there were no living monsters hiding amongst the corpses, when I noticed something.

There were several arrows lodged in the fence. I scrolled over to the bodies in the holes only to find that many of them had arrows in them, too. The only thing was...none of my villagers knew how to use a bow and arrow.

“Guess we had some help.”

Though the physician was long gone, I sent him a silent word of thanks.

Chapter 6:

My Drunk Sister and the Winter Sky

ONCE MY VILLAGERS were safely tucked into bed, I stepped out of my room. I tossed my empty bottles and snack wrappers, then peered into the fridge. I was pretty hungry after being on edge all day. We still had plenty of meat from the village, so I decided to fry some up.

As I was cooking, the door from the hallway opened to reveal Sayuki in her suit. Her face was drawn and tired, which really took away from her good looks. Seeing her in a suit still threw me off. In my eyes and in my memories, she was always in a school uniform, and I had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that she was now an adult with a full-time job. I checked the time—it was ten. She must've been working overtime.

"That smells good, Oniichan," Sayuki said.

"Want some?"

"Yes, please. I'm starving! I didn't realize how late it was."

Not only did she call me "Oniichan" like it was nothing, her voice seemed almost *sweet*. Sure, she'd been a little less prickly with me lately, but this seemed a little fishy. Maybe something happened at work that put her in a good mood. I studied her as she went to watch TV, whistling as she started shedding her suit.

Go do that in your room, please! It'll get all crumpled if you don't hang it up!

Despite her slender frame, Sayuki ate like a horse, so I gave her a generous helping of rice before adding the meat and sauce. I added some eggs for good measure.

"It's done."

"Thanks..." she replied listlessly.

Now, Sayuki was sitting with her legs under the kotatsu in just her shirt. It looked like she was expecting me to bring the food to her. Still, she was grinning

and bobbing her head side to side. It was kind of creepy, to be honest.

“Man, that looks so good! Thanks, Oniichan! Lemme give you a kiss to say thanks!” She puckered her lips.

What the heck?! Is this really my sister?!

I put a hand on her forehead to keep her away from me—and that was when I noticed the smell coming off her, and her flushed cheeks.

She's drunk!

Suddenly it all made sense. I totally forgot that my little sister was well past drinking age. I gave her a light chop on the head, using the opportunity to put our food on the table so we could sit down to eat. It wasn't a complex meal, but the sauce and meat were a delicious combination.

“Meat tastes so much better when you're tired,” Sayuki said as she shoveled the food into her mouth. It might not have been particularly ladylike, but I was glad to see she liked the food I'd made.

“You've been coming home late a lot recently. Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I'm fine! It's because I love my job! I'm fine!” she repeated, giving me a self-satisfied thumbs-up.

It was a weird response, but she didn't seem like she was lying. Though she had bags under her eyes, the joy in her gaze was genuine. Maybe it was just the alcohol?

“But...” she said, though she didn't continue her thought.

Was there something on her mind? I was supposed to ask “what's wrong?” at a time like this, right? I didn't know what I could possibly say to her that would help, but if Gams saw me ignoring my sister's troubles, he'd be really disappointed in me.

“If you wanna get something off your chest, I'll listen, okay? I probably won't be much help, but sometimes it's good just to vent.”

There was a serious look in Sayuki's eyes as she put down her chopsticks. I returned her gaze evenly, possibly for the first time in years.

“Lately, it feels like someone’s been following me...or maybe just watching me. I mean, I know it’s probably my imagination, but...”

“You’ve got a stalker?”

I think most people would have brushed off her worries, but Sayuki had been stalked before, when I was in college. That was probably why she was so worried about this. I was always jealous that she was so good-looking, but beauty had a dark side, too.

“That’s worrying. Especially since you’ve been coming home so late,” I said.

“You’re...worried about me?” She looked up at me anxiously.

“Of course I am. Loser or not, I’m still your brother.”

“I always thought you didn’t like me.”

What? Wasn’t it the other way around?

“No, but I get why *you* hated me for so long. I’m pathetic.”

“Y’know, you’re starting to sound a little like you used to... It’s kind of...cool.” Sayuki quickly looked away, embarrassed at her admission.

I chose to believe that her flush was just from the alcohol. But even if they came from a drunken place, her words touched me. I could practically feel myself tearing up as I remembered how much closer we used to be.

“Cool. Yup, that’s me.” I tried to hide my embarrassment by gently ruffling her hair. I hadn’t done that for years either, but my hand still went through the motions automatically. I had to remember that she wasn’t a kid anymore! I waited for her to get mad and snap at me, but she didn’t.

“Sayuki?”

“O-oh...sorry. I’m getting real sleepy. Probably the alcohol. I’m not drunk though...” She laughed, waving her hands in front of her face.

I’d thought she was sobering up, but clearly I was wrong.

“Why don’t we exchange numbers? Then I can come get you on nights when you’re coming home late.” I took my smartphone out of my pocket and offered it to her.

It was Mom's old phone. She gave it to me recently to make sure I had a way to get in touch while I was working. I was fine with just getting a cheap burner phone without Internet or anything, but she told me to "get with the times." Meanwhile, Dad, who still used a phone that looked like a brick, almost choked behind her.

"You sure it's okay to call you?"

"Of course. As long as it's not when I'm working."

"Okay. But if something happens, don't go crazy this time, okay?"

Sayuki smiled at her phone as she typed in my number and email address. I hoped it made her feel a little safer, at least.

There was still a long way to go before I was as good a brother as Gams, but I felt like I was slowly getting there.

My villagers were so grateful that I gained a lot of my FP back the very next day. It was still nothing compared to how much I could get if I paid for it, though. This game clearly favored the rich. I was sure free-to-play players could still have fun with it, but I couldn't see how they'd ever get past the Day of Corruption. They'd be having fun with the free version for almost a month, then the game would suddenly force such a difficult event on them... Then again, maybe that was the point. They'd probably be so attached by then that they couldn't help but pour their real money into it.

"Very sneaky..."

It was annoying, but the developers sure knew how to squeeze money out of people.

Today, my villagers were busy working on repairs.

"You should take it easy for a bit, Gams."

"Sorry, Rodice, no can do! Who's gonna do the heavy lifting without me?" Gams replied, holding a log in his arms.

Although Chem's magic sealed up his injuries, he still wasn't at full physical strength yet. That didn't stop him from working, though. Chem asked him to

rest several times, but he refused.

“I’m fairly strong myself, you know,” Rodice said.

That might’ve been true, but Rodice would still struggle to take on Gams’s work. I thought about telling Gams to rest via prophecy, but a tired Gams would still get more done than a fighting-fit Rodice. In fact, Gams was working just as hard as he did on days when he hadn’t spent the previous days fighting.

“This needs to be done before anything else attacks.”

Clearly, Gams was prioritizing getting the fence fixed as soon as possible. Last night, everyone was too tired to do anything but sleep, and so they woke up to a fence full of gaps and holes that monsters could still crawl through.

“You mustn’t push yourself,” Chem warned him, running up to his side and taking a good look at his face.

“Don’t worry. I know.” Gams didn’t react to the anxiety in her eyes.

“I’ll give you a massage!” Carol promised, jumping in between Gams and Chem. “Daddy loves them!”

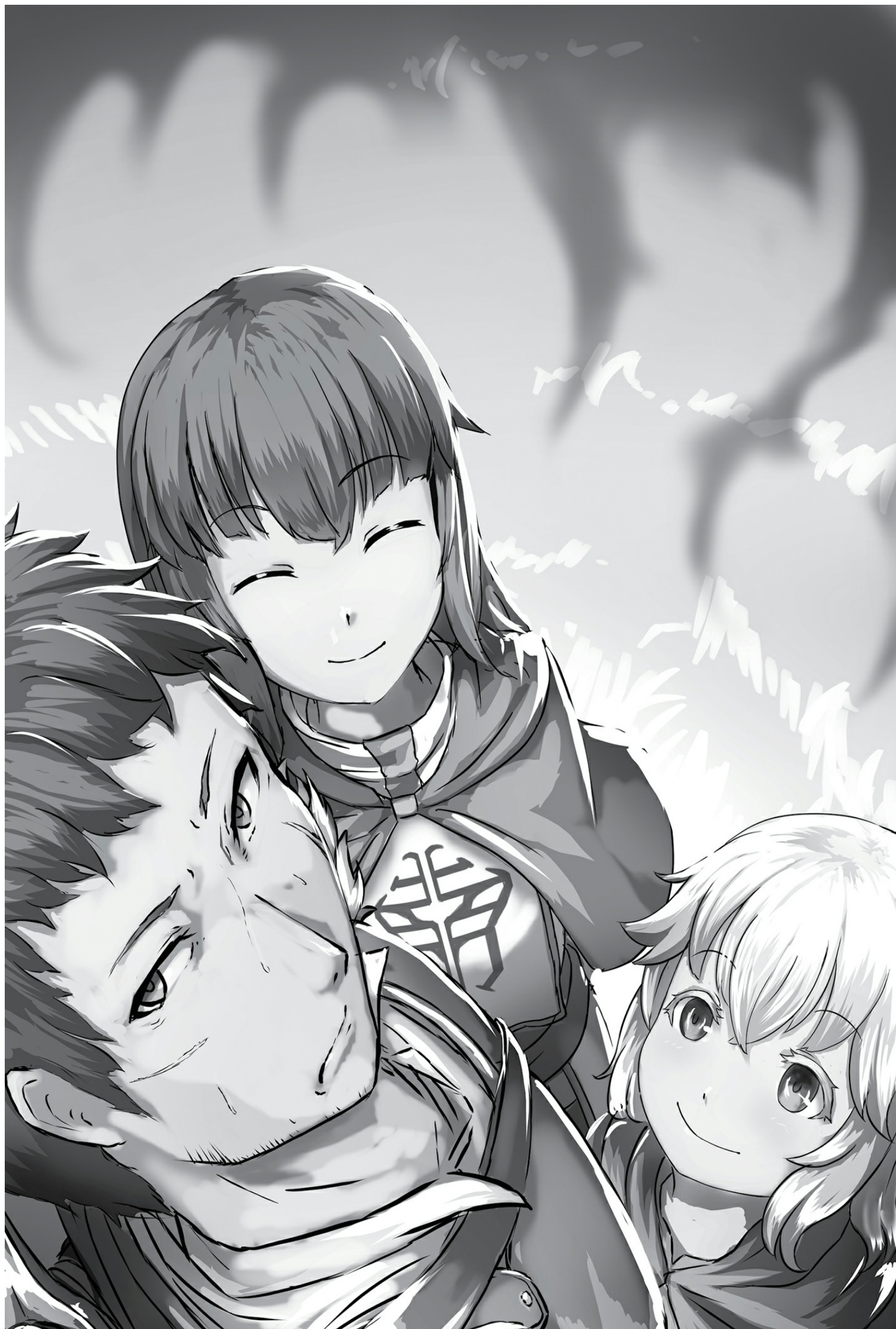
Chem gave her a hard stare.

“Carol, Gams and I are talking. It’s rude to interrupt.” The look on her face was frightening. For a literal holy woman who was usually so kind and gentle, she was *really angry*.

“Gams would rather talk to me!”

“No, he would not.”

The two of them beamed at Gams, but he didn’t even bat an eye. Though when I zoomed in closer, I could swear there was sweat dripping down his temples.



“Stop bothering Gams, Carol! He’s tired! Chem, I could use your help, too!” Lyra called out.

“Okay!” The girls disappeared deeper into the cave, and Gams breathed a sigh of relief.

I wanted to keep watching, but I had work that night. I pulled on my overalls, watching my villagers for a few more moments to motivate me, and then left to meet my ride.

I was back at work—I wanted to earn enough to buy more FP. We weren’t cleaning a supermarket today but a multi-purpose building where we were handling the floors and windows. Floors were fine, but windows were harder than I expected. I’d seen people in films and dramas clean windows like it was nothing, but in reality it wasn’t that simple. The boss and Yamamoto-san didn’t seem to have any issues with it, though, so there was probably a knack to it that I didn’t have yet. Instead, I focused my attention on the floors, where I’d be more helpful.

“It makes a big difference working in daylight,” I murmured to myself.

It was the first time I was working during the afternoon, and it was pretty refreshing.

“Hey!” Yamamoto-san bowed his head at me frantically as I stood in front of the vending machine to take my break. “Sorry about the other night. Something urgent came up. Thanks so much for covering for me!”

“It’s no problem,” I replied—despite a little panic on my part, things had all worked out. “My thing was on the last day of the month, but I was fine working the day before.”

“Oh, good! Want something to drink? I’ll get it for you as thanks.”

It would be rude to decline, right? I nodded. “I’ll have a hot milk tea, if that’s okay.”

“Sure thing. Here.”

The one he selected happened to be my favorite brand. It was December

now, and the days were getting even colder, so I was grateful to have something to warm me up.

“What was this urgent thing that came up, anyway?” I asked.

“Uh, I’ll tell you if you promise to keep it a secret from the boss,” Yamamoto-san said, lowering his voice.

“Sure. I’m not much of a talker.”

I could guess what it was, anyway. Unlike me, Yamamoto-san was socially adept, so he probably had a date or something. Why else would he call out?

“I know you’re a gamer, too... Truth is, there was a limited-time event in one of my games,” he said.

“Oh.”

His answer was *not* what I’d expected. Most people would probably be appalled that he skipped out on work over a video game, but I wasn’t. That would make me a hypocrite.

“I totally get it,” I said. “Was it a rare event or something?”

“Whew! I was kinda scared you’d get mad at me. Anyway, remember I was telling you about that game I was super into? It suddenly came out that there was gonna be an event at the end of the month, and I wanted the day to prepare for it.” Confident that I understood, his explanation became more animated.

I couldn’t help but be curious. The end of the month was a common time for games to run events, so it could easily be coincidence that we were both busy around that time. Even so, I decided to dig a little deeper.

“What kind of game is it?” I asked. “Like, an RPG or...a village sim?”

“No way. I get bored with those kinda games. I’m way more into the battle-royale type things where you kill other players. Y’know, the kinda stuff you can’t do in real life!”

Yamamoto-san’s eagerness to kill was slightly terrifying, but I did hear those sorts of games were popular right now. Since they were multiplayer, you’d be facing a different strategy every time, so it was hard to get tired of them. Lots of

my Internet acquaintances were into them.

Anyway, he wasn't talking about *The Village of Fate*. There was killing in that game too, but not between people.

"Oh yeah, I've tried those games before, but I can't get into them. I'm not bad at fighting games, though," I said.

"Oh, right. Well, I was gonna say you should give it a try, but I guess there's no point now." Yamamoto-san crossed his arms and began to think. From his appearance alone, I always thought he was too well adjusted to get along with me, but I really did like talking games with him on our breaks. To be honest, there wasn't much else I knew how to have a conversation about. I gulped down my milk tea, grateful that I happened to meet someone I could connect with. It made me feel ready to face the rest of the workday.

"Finally..."

That night, work was tougher than usual. We were meant to finish in the late afternoon, but the client was uptight and kept pointing out spots we "missed," so we weren't done until well after sunset. It seemed like bad luck to have yet another client like that, but the boss told me it was pretty common. The cleaning industry was much more complicated than I realized.

I wanted some more snacks and drinks, so I had the boss drop me off at the convenience store near my place. Once I got everything I wanted, I began my walk home. I'd splurged a little; it was nice.

Our neighborhood was pretty rural, so the streets were quiet at this time of night. Quiet enough to hear the odd burst of laughter from one of the houses of a family spending time together. Seeing families getting on used to bother me a lot, but lately I didn't even give them a second glance. It was amazing just how much a simple change in perspective could affect your life.

"Meat buns on a cold day... Is there anything better?" I said aloud.

I walked along the path, my meat bun in one hand and some tea in the other. Just then, my phone started to ring in my pocket. Stuffing the rest of the bun into my mouth, I pulled out my phone to see that Sayuki was calling me. I

blinked in surprise. This was the first time she'd ever called me.

"Hello? What's a matter?" I asked around the rest of the food in my mouth.

"Oniichan! I think my stalker is following me!"

I swallowed the rest of the bun immediately when I heard the panic in her voice.

"Where are you? I'll come straight there!"

"I'm hiding out in the convenience store near our house!"

I turned around and started sprinting back the way I came. I wasn't going to let anyone lay a hand on my sister!

Chapter 7:

My Troubled Sister and My Old Wounds

I RACED BACK to the convenience store. When I got there, I was gasping for breath. Pushing vacuum cleaners around was one thing, but I hadn't run like that for years! Well, other than to get home on the Day of Corruption.

I could see Sayuki through the storefront window. Apart from the store employees, there was no one else inside, and no stalker-type guy I could see. Sayuki spotted me, the anxious look on her face relaxing ever so slightly. In turn, her relief made me feel a little better. I wanted to go and make sure she was okay, but then I noticed her pointing at something outside. I took my phone out and pretended to make a call so that I wouldn't arouse suspicion, and then I turned around slowly.

Sayuki was pointing toward a street corner. I kept my gaze on it, my phone still glued to my ear. I could just make out a silhouette in the darkness.

Should I try and see who it is? Might make them easier to deal with...

"I'm at the store. Could you hurry up and get me? It's freezing out here!" I made a show of huddling up from the cold as I spoke into the phone.

I walked farther away from the store, trying to get a glimpse of the person there without making it obvious. Hopefully they would think I was looking for the car that was supposed to come pick me up.

Act natural, I told myself again and again. *Just a little farther, and I should be able to see who this guy is.*

I tried to push down the anxiety welling up inside me. Just when I was finally close enough to get a good look at the figure, it turned and ran away.

Dammit!

If I ran right now, maybe I could still catch them. But just as I was about to go, my phone rang. It was Sayuki.

"Don't go after them!" she cried, her voice quivering.

Her call snapped me back to my senses. She was right. The guy was long gone. I turned to go back into the store. It was for the best—I wouldn't want things to turn out like the last time I'd caught her stalker.

Sayuki had been stalked when she was still in junior high and I was in college. Mad with rage, I grabbed the boy and screamed his head off. He was just a kid in her grade, but when I found him rooting through our garbage, it was the last straw—he was frightening her. I was ten years older than him, so I thought I could scare him off.

I never expected him to have a knife.

That blade changed everything. The twisted look in his eye and the glint of the sharp edge absolutely terrified me.

I cowered, wanting nothing more than to run away. Even with Sayuki behind me, I thought only of saving myself. I wanted to run and leave her behind. I couldn't remember what I'd said, but I was sure it was pathetic. I probably begged for my life. The only thing I could remember clearly was the tearful look on my sister's face.

The kid stabbed me. I couldn't dodge fast enough, and the knife sank into my stomach. I won't ever forget the feeling of metal plunging inside me, and the agonizing pain that came with it.

The next thing I knew, I was in a hospital bed, hooked up to an IV. Though I lost a lot of blood, none of my organs were hit, so I made a quick recovery, all things considered.

That image of Sayuki's tear-stricken face came back to me. Back then, I just let my consciousness fade away without even offering her a single word of reassurance.

If I went after this new stalker only to have them injure me, who would be left to protect Sayuki? If they had a knife, I'd be done for; I had nothing to defend myself with. They might even kill me, and I had my villagers to take care of.

“I can’t make the same mistake twice.”

The scar on my flank was a reminder not to underestimate anyone ever again—I unconsciously touched my clothes over that spot. I returned to my sister, who was glaring at me in front of the store.

“Look, I’m glad you came when I called, but I thought I told you not to go crazy this time!”

“Quiet down, will ya?” I retorted, gesturing at her. “It’s the middle of the night!”

“Ugh!” Sayuki pouted and looked away.

She always did that when she was in a mood or getting told off, ever since she was a kid. I wondered how many more habits she retained, all unnoticed because I did my best not to look at her these past ten years.

“Can we go?”

“Yeah, fine. And, uh...thanks, Oniichan.”

“No problem.”

It was just like old times, but this wasn’t a change in attitude on Sayuki’s part. It was just that she saw the effort I was putting in and was willing to meet me halfway.

When I tried to help Sayuki with her last stalker, I did everything wrong, and I hated to think how much worse things could’ve been if he’d gone after Sayuki instead of running off after stabbing me. I’d started lifting weights after the attack, hoping to gain the strength to protect Sayuki next time, but that was a failure, too—these muscles were just for show. I’d forgotten my original motivation long ago, and I’d started pretending that my time working out somehow made up for not having a job. Really, it was just pathetic—like everything about me back then.

“What are you sighing about?” Sayuki asked.

“Ah, don’t worry. It’s nothing.”

I could beat myself up about the past later, when I was alone. Right now, my job was to make sure Sayuki felt safe. We talked about both of our jobs all the way home. I told an animated account of how Yamamoto-san and Misaki-san warned me about some of the mistakes I made at work, and Sayuki giggled at my story.

The wind was cold on that winter's evening, but talking to my sister warmed me up more than the tea in my hand ever could.

Sayuki let me have the first bath, so I hurriedly washed myself down before getting in the tub. Not long ago, she would complain about having to use my bathwater. I knew she had a long day at work, so I got out quickly for her.

"I'm done!" I called.

"Thanks!"

Finished with my bath, I grabbed the drinks I bought earlier and took them up to my room. On our way home, Sayuki and I agreed that I would come walk her home during the quieter hours of the night, and if I couldn't, Mom or Dad would. They agreed right away, which was a huge load off my mind.

Now that that was settled, it was time to go back to my villagers, but I wasn't that worried about them for now. The monsters had calmed down to the point where they usually didn't even attack if my villagers encountered them. I checked in on the village anyway, but everyone was fast asleep, as they should be at this time of night. I looked at the backlog too, but it was the same old story: Chem and Carol fighting over Gams and Rodice and Lyra fawning over each other. It was a time of relative peace, so it would be a good time to use my FP and perform another miracle.

"Hm...I could use more people, but what I really want is more fighting power. Or maybe I could spawn a merchant to stock up on the stuff we're low on."

I was worried about my villagers' lack of money before, but after playing a little longer, it seemed they could sell some of the cave's ores or some parts from the monsters they killed.

"The merchant it is. Having the right items is important in any game. Wait..."

what's this?"

As I scrolled down the list of miracles, I found one highlighted a different color.

"Limited time bonus event. Completing the event will unlock a powerful item or ally, or both."

It was tempting; any true gamer wouldn't let an opportunity like this pass them by. I checked the time limit. I'd need to start the event before the end of the day. If I didn't do this now, maybe I'd lose access to those items or allies for all eternity. I had enough points to start the event, too. But I was worried about what exactly it would involve.

"It's only been two days since the Day of Corruption..." Would my villagers forgive me if I threw them into danger again so soon? "This isn't just any game. I gotta be sure about this first."

Every one of my villagers was irreplaceable. Tempting as the offer was, I couldn't justify the risk.

"Damn, it's already this late? Guess I'll use the bathroom and then head to bed."

I wasn't feeling great, so I ended up sitting on the can for a while. Suddenly, I heard footsteps and my sister's voice from outside.

"Hey, can I borrow your computer? I wanted to look something up, but I'm running out of space on my phone."

"Sure." I didn't see what her phone's space had to do with anything, but I had no problem with her borrowing my—

Wait.

"Wait a sec! Use my new one, all right?! Not the old one!" I called out, but there was no response.

Though I'd mentioned the game to Sayuki before briefly, I didn't tell her exactly what it was about. What if she accidentally performed an expensive miracle or something?

I cleaned myself up in record time before flying out of the bathroom and into

my bedroom. Sayuki turned around slowly. I could see the guilt in her eyes and the cold sweat forming on her forehead. This didn't look good.

"I'm sorry... I think I must've clicked something..." Sayuki stood up to let me see the screen.

There was a message on it, written in huge letters.

"Bonus event activated! The event will start at 10 a.m. the day after tomorrow."

Why, Sayuki?!

Chapter 8:

Carol's Innocence and My Surprise

THERE WAS NOTHING I could do about it now. It was my fault for leaving the game running and giving Sayuki permission to use my PC.

"Can't you cancel it?" Sayuki asked timidly.

It didn't seem like it from a quick check. I didn't expect any of this to happen, but I wasn't mad at her.

"Nah, but I was thinking about starting the event anyway, so don't worry about it. If you still wanna search for something, you can use my other computer."

I let Sayuki sit at my new PC while I turned my attention back to the Village of Fate.

The day after tomorrow at ten...

I checked the calendar to see if I had work that day. Luckily, I had the day off. I would be able to give the event my whole focus. Thinking about it now, I probably would've regretted it if I let the event pass me by. Since I had no choice, I might as well enjoy it.

I settled into bed after Sayuki went back to her room. All things considered, it had been a pretty good day. I was worried about Sayuki's stalker, of course, but I couldn't help but see the silver lining—it was bringing us closer together.

After such a busy day, I knew I would sleep well.

I woke up the next morning at eight. Sayuki and Dad would have left for work already. It was time to start my daily routine.

Getting out of bed, I checked on my villagers.

"Mornin', guys," I said.

First, I checked whether anything unusual was going on, and then I scanned

the area around the cave on the map. There was nothing amiss, so I headed downstairs. I ran into Mom, and we ate breakfast together.

“You and Sayuki came home together last night, didn’t you? I’m glad to see you two getting along.”

“She thinks she has a stalker, so I went to get her.”

“Oh, that’s right! Did you get a good look at the guy’s face?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Mom sat back in her seat, frowning. After what happened all those years ago, I really didn’t want to tell her anything about this, but I had no choice. I needed her to look out for Sayuki when I couldn’t.

“Do take good care of your sister, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

She didn’t need to tell me. I’d spent the past ten years neglecting Sayuki, and while this wouldn’t make up for that, it’d be a start.

“Just...be sure you stay out of danger this time. You’re *both* too precious for me to lose.”

“I know...” I didn’t know how else to respond.

It was only a single sentence, but I felt it like a knife piercing through my chest. I always thought my parents had long since given up on me. I used that as an excuse to stop trying. Sometimes, I even hated them—I shifted the blame for my failures onto them and the society they fit right into that I couldn’t find a place in. And if I hated them, it made perfect sense that they’d stop caring about me.

But I was wrong. My villagers had cleared my clouded vision and let me see that my family loved me all along. Throwing myself headfirst into a world of games to escape my reality, I found my salvation. There was still so little I understood about the game, but I knew I had a lot to thank it for.

I ate the rest of my breakfast in silence, keeping my head down so Mom wouldn’t see my watering eyes, and then returned to my room.

“I gotta make sure we get past this event safely. It’s the least I can do to thank them for all they’ve done for me.”

I was conflicted between increasing my villagers’ numbers or keeping my FP saved up in case of an emergency. It was the exact same problem I had before the Day of Corruption. Calling extra help for my village was expensive no matter how I went about it, and a lot of my FP was already spent on activating the event itself.

“Maybe there’ll be something cheap and useful.” I stared at the screen, my eyes drifting down the list of miracles. “Hey, I don’t think this was here before.”

“Egg gacha.”

What did that mean? I knew what gacha meant—those kinds of games were popular lately. They were based on those vending machines where you put money in to get a random toy, but in the online version, you’d get a random character or item. There were a lot of people who equated gacha games with microtransactions—and they weren’t necessarily wrong.

Anyway, “egg gacha” probably meant that I would get a random egg. I wasn’t really sure what my villagers would do with a single egg, so I clicked on the miracle for an explanation.

“Spin for a free egg once per month. The prizes include bird eggs, reptile eggs, amphibian eggs, monster eggs, and rare monster eggs. When the egg hatches, the first person the creature sees will become its master. It can be raised as a pet or for food. There are no downsides.”

It was more or less what I expected. It was nice that it was free, but the problem was you didn’t know what would hatch. Though I guess it couldn’t be harmful as long as it saw one of my villagers as its master. If it was a chicken or something, we’d get regular eggs. If it was a reptile or amphibian, it would make a tasty meal or a cute pet...if you were into pets like that, anyway (I wasn’t). If it was a monster, it could help defend the village, presumably more so if it was a rare one.

Now that I thought about it, there was another game involving monsters with this kind of random egg mechanic. I’d seen it in some fantasy anime, too. Maybe eggs were in right now.

“This might not be so bad. Plus, it’s free. Guess I’ll just go for it.”

If it took too long to hatch, it might still make decent scrambled eggs. I’d leave that up to my villagers. To be honest, these were all just excuses for me to go ahead and satiate my urge to roll the gacha. I used to badger Mom to let me use those machines all the time when I was a kid. It was more about the chance of winning something rare than the prize itself.

“Let’s see what I get...”

I started the gacha. Images of eggs flashed across my screen with a “STOP” button underneath. It was up to me to stop it at just the right time. There were eggs that looked like ordinary chicken eggs and ones with colors that suggested they were poisonous. They were all different sizes, too—some looked big enough to burst out of the screen, and others were no bigger than my little finger.

“It’s too fast for me to try and aim for anything. Plus, the order keeps changing. Guess I’ll just click whenever and try my luck.” It wasn’t like the egg’s appearance would even tell me what I was getting, anyway.

Following the eggs scrolling past was making me dizzy, so I closed my eyes and went for it. I clicked once and then opened my eyes to find a single oblong egg on the screen. It didn’t look like a chicken egg despite being about the same size.

I wonder what’s inside...

The egg disappeared from the screen and was replaced by text.

“Congratulations on receiving your egg. It will be placed near your village.”

So it wasn’t even going to tell me what was inside? Not only that, but it was being put somewhere for my villagers to find?

I checked the map; there was a blinking red light, which was probably where my egg was. It was quite far away from the fence, a little ways into the forest. My villagers would have to keep their eyes peeled to find it—and they could miss it easily if I didn’t give them a hint.

“Guess it’s time to prophesize.”

“There is a fragile life waiting for you in the forest, hiding within a white shell. It remains to be seen whether that life shall be of any assistance to you, but it may be amusing to seek it out and see.”

I looked at what I just wrote, but somehow it didn't seem right. I should probably reword it so it was easier to understand. I should also warn them that something was happening tomorrow. It was hard to keep the whole God thing going without making my message sound too ominous. After many revisions, I finally delivered my prophecy.

“There is a fragile life waiting for you in the forest, hiding within a white shell. It remains to be seen whether that life can be of use to you, but it may interest you to pick it up. What to do with that life will be your decision—whether you raise it or consume it. Furthermore, I foresee that a strong force of fate will descend upon you tomorrow. Be sure to prepare yourselves.”

Writing prophecies never got any easier. I'd tried to be more creative lately, and I'd started looking up fortunes online for help, but I still didn't have much confidence in my writing abilities.

Still, my villagers took my words to heart and quickly found the egg hidden in the forest.

“Mommy, Daddy! I found it!” Surprisingly, it was Carol who spotted it first. “Yummy! I love eggs!”

“Now, Carol, we mustn't eat it! I know the Lord gave us permission to do what we liked, but it is still a gift from Him. We must treasure it.”

“Yes, Mommy!” Carol replied obediently. She carried the egg and placed it gently on my altar. “Thank you, God! Because you said we gotta treasure it, I'm gonna give it to you like all my other treasures!”

The egg glowed briefly before disappearing.

She... She did not just...

“Did she just...send the egg to me,” I inhaled, “as an offering?!”

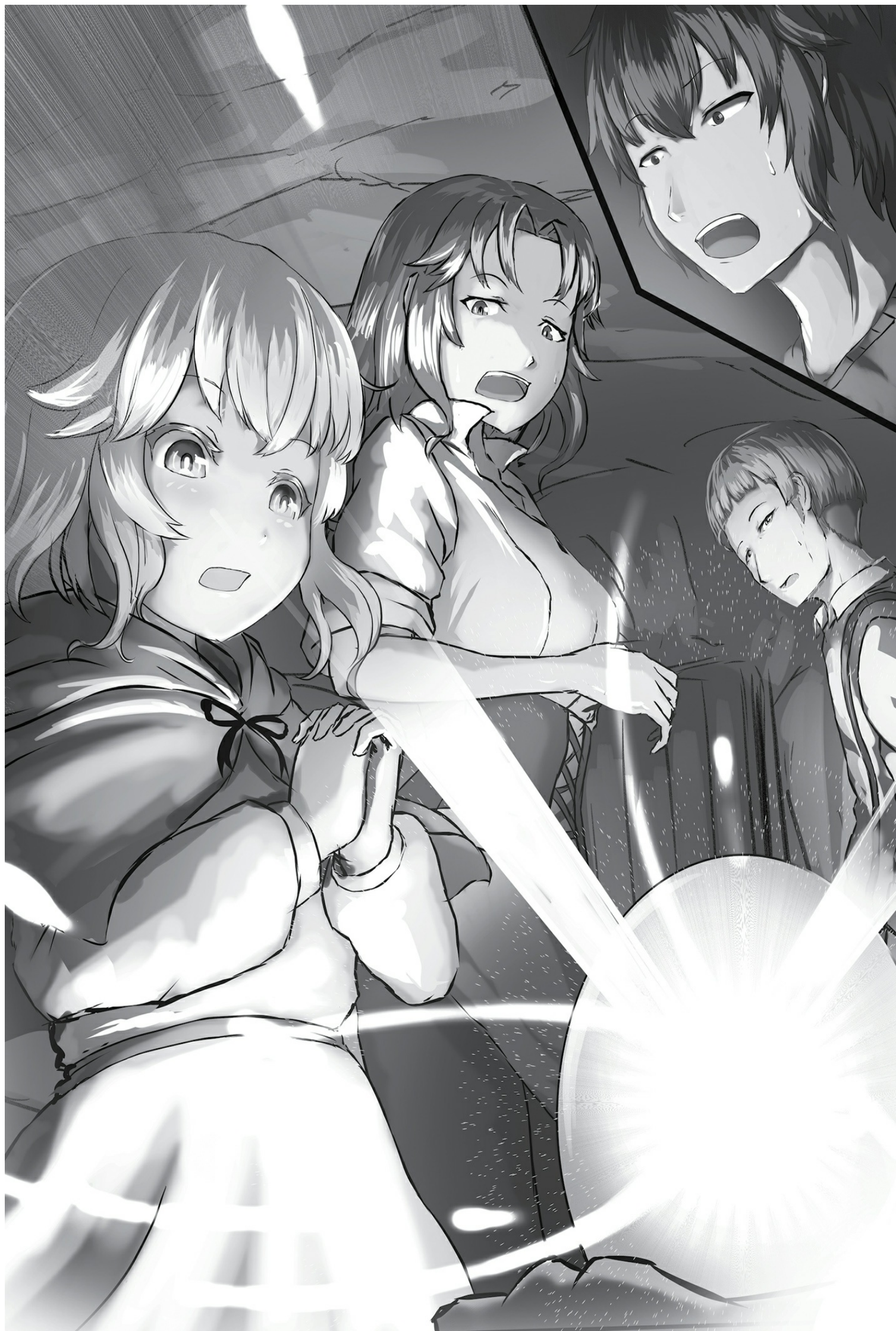
Carol! That was supposed to be a gift from me!

Lyra was gaping at Carol, far too shocked to be mad at her.

“Guess there’s nothing I can do about it now, ’cept write her a nice thank-you prophecy after it arrives tomorrow...”

“Lord! Please forgive her! She meant no harm! Please! Please forgive us!” Lyra cried desperately in front of my statue.

Don’t worry, I’m not mad.



Carol merely watched her mom in confusion, clearly not understand what she just did.

“Anyway...what do I do with the egg? If it’s not a chicken egg, it’ll be too risky to eat. Should I try to hatch it?”

There was an uneasy feeling brewing in the pit of my stomach. I wasn’t a huge fan of reptiles or amphibians, but I couldn’t just throw the egg away. I’d just have to keep my fingers crossed and hope it was a bird. Worrying about it wouldn’t solve anything, so I drew a quick picture of the egg and posted it on a forum to see if anyone could identify it. I got a speedy response, with most people saying it looked like a reptile egg, likely a snake or a lizard.

“That’s all I need...”

Still, it was a gift from one of my villagers, so I wanted to treat it with respect. I started to look up ways to incubate and look after the thing. I could always give it away to someone who liked reptiles. As much as I told myself it was just the development company sending these offerings out, it was hard to convince myself that the game world didn’t really exist somewhere in a parallel universe. If that was true, I might have to deal with a monster hatching in the future.

“C’mon, that’d be way too crazy. It’ll just be a little lizard or a snake, something that can be kept as a pet. I guess I should really be worried about how my family will react...”

I’d need my parents’ permission to keep an animal in the house. I was always worried about my relationship with Sayuki, and if it turned out she hated reptiles, it might start another rocky period between us.

Just then, I was reminded of someone else I used to know who hated them, though I hadn’t seen her in years. The memory of her face sent pain shooting through my chest, so I quickly shook my head to clear it. This wasn’t the time for a trip down memory lane...

“If only cats came from eggs. Then maybe I could’ve had a kitten instead...”

With so much going on, this was the *last* thing I needed. I couldn’t stay mad at Carol...but I hoped she wouldn’t mind if I complained about her a little.

Epilogue

“YOSHIO! You’ve got another parcel!”

I trudged downstairs at my mom’s call, anxiety shooting through me. She was holding a smallish package.

I knew it.

There was a label on the package that read “Perishable Goods.” Well, that wasn’t entirely inaccurate.

“What is it? Meat? More fruit?” Mom asked excitedly, peering at the box.

I had to explain sooner or later anyway. I placed the box on the kotatsu in the living room. I opened it up. In the center of layers of bubble wrap sat something white and long. It was the same egg I’d seen on the screen yesterday. I picked it up; it was pretty hard, especially considering that the people who posted yesterday said lizard or snake eggs tended to be soft.

“An egg? It doesn’t look like a chicken egg,” Mom said.

“Hmm...it’s probably a reptile egg.” I watched her reaction carefully, but she didn’t seem displeased.

“Did you ask them to send you a pet reptile so you could get closer to Sayuki?”

“Huh?” Why would something like that win Sayuki’s favor?

“She likes reptiles. So does your father. I suppose that sort of thing runs in the family.”

“I didn’t know...”

“Your father had a pet lizard back before we lived together. I don’t like them, so he left it with his parents when we married. But Sayuki likes them, too—that’s why she keeps one in her room.”

She does?!

I hadn’t set foot in Sayuki’s room once in the past ten years, so it was no wonder I didn’t know. They must be quiet creatures too, since I never heard it

either.

“I’m used to it now. I can even see why she likes it so much!”

“Yeah...”

First of all, I was shocked that I was so ignorant of my sister’s hobbies. Second, I was amazed that there was a reptile living in the room right next to mine that I never knew about.

Anyway, thanks to her love of scaly things, the problem of the egg was solved fairly easily. I decided to ask her about how to raise it when she was back from work. For the moment, I wrapped it in a towel to keep in my room. The Internet told me that reptile eggs needed to be handled with care because of their fragility, but this one was tough as nails. It was also important to keep it moist.

Placing the egg carefully on my desk, I returned downstairs. I grabbed a wash bowl and filled it with soil we kept for the kitchen garden, then sprayed the soil with water. I placed the egg on top of it.

That was all I could do for now; the rest I would need to ask Sayuki about. I sent her a quick text to let her know I wanted her help with something when she got home. Her response came almost immediately.

“I’ll come home early. Then I can eat with you guys.”

That was quick. Wasn’t she supposed to be working? I would’ve thought she’d get told off for using her phone at work, but maybe that wasn’t an issue at her job.

Anyway, with the problem of the egg out of the way, I could go back to focusing on tomorrow’s event. Not that there was anything I could do beyond giving my villagers a small warning in the prophecy.

“Welp, I’ve done what I can, so I guess the rest is up to fate... Kinda ironic.” I chuckled to myself, half-lamenting the fact that there was no one around to share in the irony.

As promised, Sayuki came home at six. Dad came home early too, meaning we were all together for dinner, which was nice. As little as one month ago, I

wouldn't have believed this was possible. Sayuki and our parents ate together, but I was always the one missing. Without the feeling of guilt that used to plague me when I ate dinner alone, my heart felt warm, and the food tasted so much better.

I planned to ask Sayuki for her advice on the egg after dinner, but since Dad was here and he liked reptiles too, I decided to pick both their brains while I had the chance.

I set down my chopsticks. "I was gonna ask Sayuki too, but can I get your input on something, Dad?"

They stared at me. Sayuki looked a little angry for some reason, and while Dad was clearly trying to keep up his usual poker face, I caught the ends of his lips turning up a little.

"Go ahead," he said.

"It's to do with that text you sent me, right?" Sayuki asked.

"My village sent me some kinda reptile egg. It sounds like reptiles have been getting pretty popular in the village, and they see that as part of their development, I guess." I was up late last night putting together a backstory for the village. Luckily, they seemed to buy it. "They asked me if I wanted to try taking care of one, and I said yes. You guys like reptiles too, right?"

I asked the question as though I remembered that fact about them from years back. Hopefully Mom wouldn't say anything.

"Well, it's not like I'm an expert, but I could probably teach you a thing or two," Sayuki said.

"Feel free to ask whatever you like," said Dad. "I've even got an old tank with all the extras in the shed if you want it."

I was surprised how willing they were to help me out. Fetching the egg from upstairs, I showed it to them to get their advice.

"It definitely looks like a reptile egg, but the shell's a little hard," Dad said. "You might be looking at a gecko or a crocodile here."

"A crocodile? Like one of those tiny ones? Are those even legal?" Sayuki

chipped in.

I could see they were getting excited now. It wasn't long before I lost track of what they were saying. Something about what kind of lighting and temperature it would need and what sort of species (none of which I recognized) it might be. I listened as best I could, only giving the occasional robotic "uh huh" or "sounds good" when they asked for my unenlightened opinion.

After all of that, we cleared a space in my room and set up the tank for the creature, filling it with sand and driftwood. They even made a small pond so that it would have everything it might need. All of this came from old equipment Dad and Sayuki already owned. Maybe it looked extra impressive to me because I was a novice, but it was like they created a whole other world inside that tank. Once it was set, they even started proudly taking photos of it from every angle. I barely did any of the work myself, so I made a mental note to get something nice for the two of them next time I was near the store.

"Make sure you let us know when it hatches! I'm curious to see what it will be," Dad said.

"Me, too! Don't forget to tell me, too!" Sayuki said.

"Got it."

I wasn't going to challenge anything they said when I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I was lucky to have them, really. Even though it was complete chance that things happened this way, this was yet another example of *The Village of Fate* deepening the bonds in our family. Maybe there really was a God of Fate out there, watching over us.

Thanks to Dad and Sayuki, I could now turn my attention to the upcoming event. Everything seemed to be okay in the village at the moment, so I decided to go to sleep to make sure I'd be up before ten tomorrow.

I woke up at nine the next morning. Not knowing what was in store, I was getting anxious, and I told myself to be prepared for anything. I thought about using the golem to try and communicate with my villagers directly, but with only gestures at my disposal, it probably wouldn't work out. I could always try

and write a message in the sand, but I couldn't assume that our languages were the same. Sure, they understood the prophecies I wrote in English, but there was no guarantee they weren't just being translated through some sort of video game sorcery. Even without all of that, the golem was expensive to run, and I needed to use it sparingly.

If I wanted to communicate with my villagers, the daily prophecy was the only way. It was an annoying limitation at times, but I supposed that was part of what kept the game interesting.

I didn't want to have to leave my computer once the event started, so I went downstairs to grab some snacks. Everyone was already gone. Back upstairs, I checked on my villagers. They were restless, clearly on edge because of the warning I sent them yesterday.

In one more hour, something would happen. A mixture of excitement and anxiety pulsed through me as I waited. I wanted to believe this event wasn't going to be another Day of Corruption, but I wouldn't put it past the developers to do something like that.

I kept my eyes on the screen as I ate my snacks. Just then, I heard a familiar sound—a cockroach.

Ugh.

Rolling up a magazine from my desk, I stood up slowly, hoping it wouldn't feel the murderous aura emanating from me. I scanned the floor, but it wasn't there. I checked the walls—nothing.

Maybe I imagined it?

I put the magazine back, just about ready to let my guard down, when I heard it again. I listened as hard as I could to pinpoint its location. It was then that I noticed the egg in the tank rocking slightly.

“It's hatching already?! Whadda I do?! Wait, Sayuki wrote me a note...”

As I was rummaging around for it, a single crack appeared in the egg. Then another. And another. Soon, the entire egg was covered in cracks. I stopped my search and watched it. A part of the shell fell away, revealing a small mouth. Then, more fell away, and I could see a head, feet, a body, and a tail.

“It’s yellow...”

Apart from its belly, the creature was a bright yellow color which seemed to glitter under the light in the tank. On its slender face was a pair of large eyes with vertical irises. Its hide had a rough texture to it, and it walked on all fours. Its tail was as long as the main part of its body.

There was no mistaking that it was a lizard. I breathed a small sigh of relief; at least it wasn’t a snake. Much as I wasn’t a reptile fan, this one was pretty small and cute. The way its eyes darted left and right as it took in its surroundings was adorable. Despite my initial fears, I was confident I could raise it with the love it deserved.

I studied it. I called it yellow before, but on closer inspection, it was more of a golden color. In fact, the way it sparkled wasn’t an effect from the light but its natural skin. There were also two small lumps protruding from the back of its head. Its back legs were quite a bit thicker than its front legs, and it had large, tough-looking scales. It looked like something I’d seen in a dinosaur encyclopedia once.

“Oh, right! I’m s’posed to take a photo of it.”

I took a quick shot with my phone and sent it to Sayuki and Dad. They told me before that whatever it was should be fine in this tank, so I hoped it would be happy in there for now.

“You’ll be fine, right?”

The lizard seemed to nod back at me, though I was sure it was a coincidence. At least it was obedient.

“Just wait until the event is done, then I’ll come back and give you a name.”

I checked the time. It was three minutes to ten. Taking a deep, confident breath, I sat back in front of my computer, ready for the event to start.

I was so absorbed in my anticipation that I tuned out everything around me. At the time, I had no idea how that little creature staring at me from the tank was about to change my entire life—and my sense of reality.



Commentary of

THIS WORLD

This world is unreasonable. However, it will be saved by having devotion. This is a book for its details.

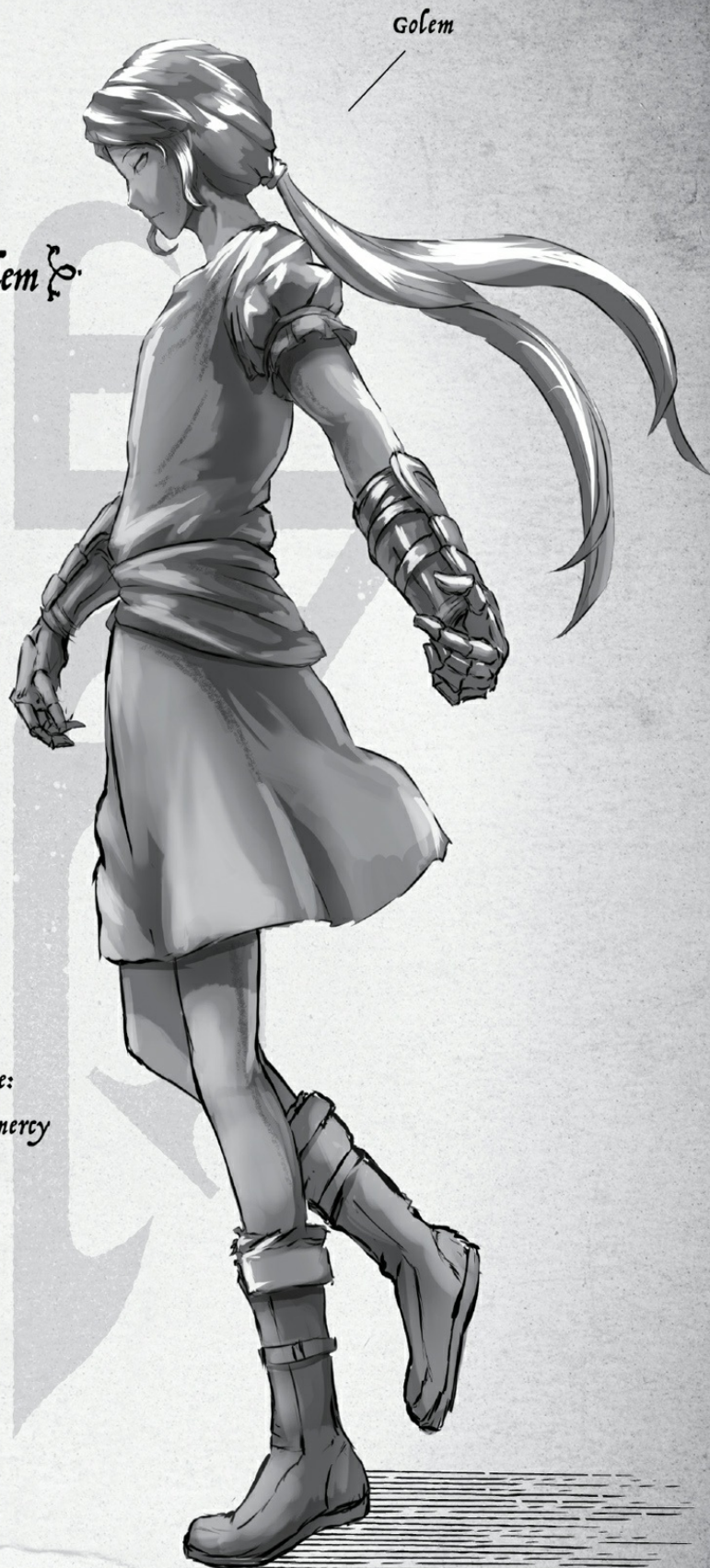


01.

♪ The God of Fate's Statue: The Golem ♪

Material: WOOD (FROM THE TREES OF MERCY)

The wooden statue of the God of Fate crafted by Gams and Chem. Due to the lack of defined carving, its shape is barely recognizable as human. It is usually kept by the cave's altar, but Yoshio is able to control it by spending FP. When it is being controlled, it takes the form of a beautiful divine being. As soon as Yoshio's FP (which acts as its energy) runs out, it immediately turns into a wooden statue again.



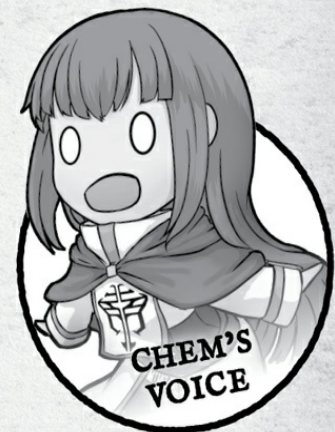
♪ Fate Points ♪

Fate points (FP) measure how grateful the Village of Fate's people feel towards the God of Fate. The more gratitude they feel, the more your FP will increase. Gifts offered by your villagers will also be converted into FP according to their value. The only other way to gain FP is to buy it at a rate of 1,000 yen for ten points. You can use FP to perform certain miracles. The more powerful the miracle, the more FP it requires, so think carefully before spending them!

How to spend Fate Points:

MIRACLES	
Spawn a traveling merchant.....	200 FP
Spawn a traveling physician.....	300 FP
Spawn a hunter.....	100 FP
Reunite with escaped villagers.....	200 FP
Spawn a carpenter.....	100 FP
Spawn mercenaries to lend your villagers a hand	200 FP
Spawn a group of hunters to stay for three days	300 FP
Random.....	50 FP

It's so wonderful
that the Lord knows
just how grateful
we are to Him!



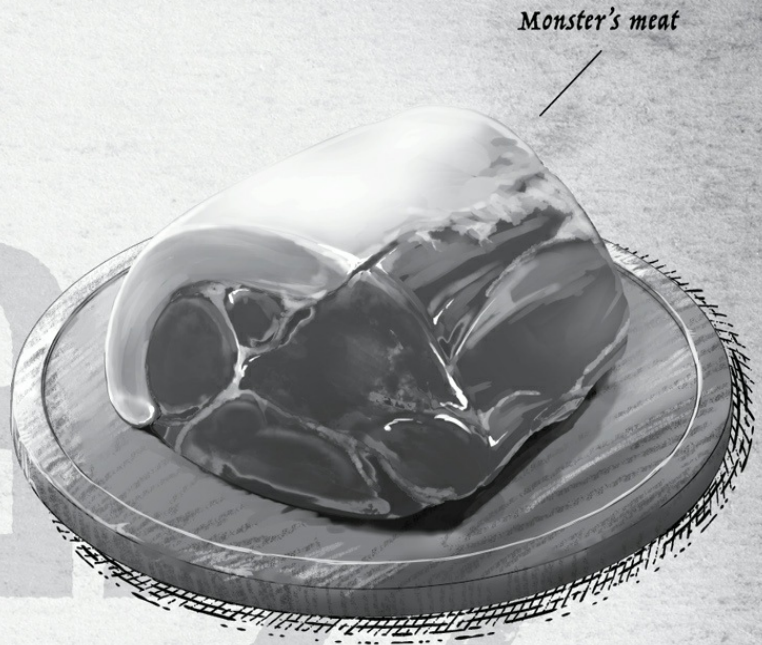
FAMILIARS		
Dog.....	350 FP	Frog.....150 FP
Cat.....	300 FP	Pigeon.....400 FP
Mouse.....	200 FP	Snake.....100 FP
Lizard.....	250 FP	Bat.....200 FP
Active Golem.....	1000 FP	Slime.....50 FP
		Unicorn.....300 FP
		And more...

02.

♪ Monster Meat ♪

Material: BOARNABY MEAT

Boarnaby (a type of monster) meat that the villagers offer at the altar. Sent to Yoshio's family pre-cut and vacuum packed. Yoshio is convinced that it's boar meat, but he's not entirely correct... This meat is particularly nutritious; it helps reenergize your body and boosts your immune system. Despite its gamey taste, it does not have a strong odor, instead striking a delicious balance between chewy and fatty.



CHEM'S VOICE



Even hunters value this meat highly, and it's great for drying, too! Gams is a big fan!

Tree of mercy



CHEM'S VOICE



The world is filled with such wonderful and useful blessings like these! This wood was also used in the church where I trained!

03.

♪ Logs ♪

Material: WOOD (FROM THE TREES OF MERCY)

A species of tree that grows in the Forbidden Forest. The bark of these trees is easy to strip, and though the wood is hard and durable, it is easy to process. The wood is also a natural insect repellent, making it popular for building houses. The trees themselves are both incredibly resilient and quick to mature. They bear a pear-like fruit, harvested in fall. Some call them the trees of mercy because they believe that such versatile trees must be a gift from the Gods.

Afterword

HELLO! If this is your first time reading my work, it's nice to meet you. If not, it's good to see you again. My name is Hirukuma, and I'm the author of *The NPCs in this Village Sim Game Must Be Real!*

This volume is a greatly improved version of the novel originally published on *Let's Be Novelists*. Even if you read the original web novel, I've rewritten about a third of it in this final version, so you should be able to enjoy it, too. This isn't a story you'd find in a typical manga, with a young boy growing into a hero. Instead, it deals with a man in his thirties struggling to set his life back on the right track.

Yoshio never managed to find a job and, despite his regrets, he doesn't have the courage to take that first step. It's only thanks to a video game that he's able to find that courage. That's a pretty simple summation of the story.

I believe, based on my own experiences, that even those who are unable to do anything for themselves can be motivated to do something for somebody else's sake, and I think that goes for a lot of people.

My aim in this work isn't to tell the unemployed that they need to get a job. It would be enough for me if my readers in a similar position to Yoshio realize they have more potential than they thought.

Aside from Yoshio, I'd like to speak about the story itself. I'll try and avoid spoilers for those who like to read the afterword first.

First off, this is not an *isekai*, and the main character is in no way overpowered! He's simply a shut-in NEET playing a mysterious video game. I know that doesn't sound very exciting, but trust me when I say it is! As I wrote, I tried to make it engaging despite the very ordinary setting. That's all I can really say without giving too much away, so please do go ahead and read for yourself!

If you already finished the story, what did you think? Did you have a favorite character? As the author, I hope you'll take a liking to Yoshio, but personally, Carol is my favorite character. Don't get me wrong, though, I'm not a *lolicon*!

Without her, the story would have likely ended up much darker than it is. I think Carol did a lot to raise the spirits of those around her, including Yoshio. She also holds a lot of importance in the story as a main character.

I also like the other characters a lot, of course, and I am very attached to all five core villagers. There's the strong and dependable Gams, his sister Chem, who is...unusually fond of him, Rodice who looks feeble at first glance but has a level head, and his cheerful and plucky wife Lyra.

Each one of these characters contributes to the story in their own way. In the real-life parts of the story, we have Yoshio, his sister Sayuki, and his parents, as well as Yoshio's boss and coworkers. Not one of them is a background character; each has their role to play. The story moves forward under the influence of the game and real-life events, so I hope you'll enjoy both of these parallel parts and their characters.

Finally, there are some people I want to thank. Firstly, I'd like to thank N-sama, who first reached out to me about my work. Next, I want to thank Namako-sensei for doing the illustrations. Thank you so much for bringing my characters to life and making them look so wonderful! I look forward to working with you on future volumes.

I'm grateful to everyone who was involved in the publishing of this book. It was all thanks to your hard work that this was even possible.

Finally, I want to thank those of you who are holding this book in their hands or reading it on a screen. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope you'll look forward to future volumes.

—HIRUKUMA

海鼠
Namako





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